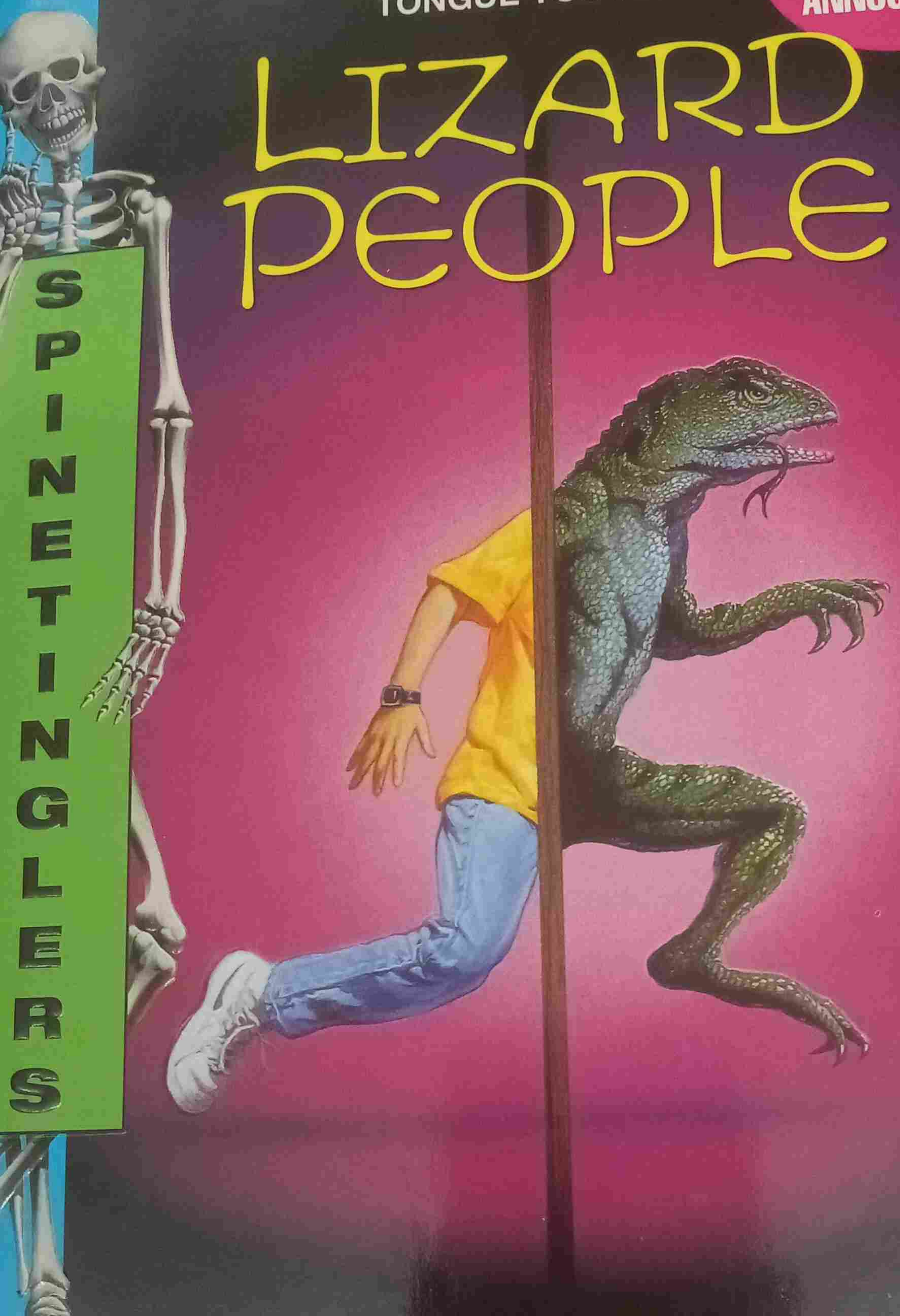
#27

SPINETINGLERS

MICHAEL, WHAT A LONG
TONGUE YOU HAVE!

CONTEST
WINNER
ANNOUNCED!

LIZARD PEOPLE



M. T. COFFIN

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or the publisher.

AVON BOOKS
A division of
The Hearst Corporation
1350 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York 10019

Copyright © 1997 by Jim DeFelice
Excerpt from *Circus F.R.E.A.K.S.* copyright © 1997 by George Edward Stanley
Published by arrangement with the author
Visit our website at **http://AvonBooks.com**
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 97-93775
ISBN: 0-380-79162-5
RL: 4.9

All rights reserved, which includes the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever except as provided by the U.S. Copyright Law. For information address Wieser and Wieser, 118 East 25th Street, New York, New York 10010.

First Avon Camelot Printing: November 1997

CAMELOT TRADEMARK REG. U.S. PAT. OFF. AND IN OTHER COUNTRIES, MARCA REGISTRADA, HECHO EN U.S.A.

Printed in the U.S.A.

OPM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

I

Ordinarily, Michael Roglitz would never have gone into the empty house at the corner of West Bay and Garden Streets. It was definitely off-limits. A thick yellow tape with the words ''Danger! Keep Out!'' was draped across the front yard. Two signs with big red letters were nailed to a tree right near the driveway. One said ''No Trespassing!'' and the other said ''Violators will be prosecuted.'' All the kids said you could go to jail just for stepping onto the grass.

But when Dave Chafetz sent him out for a long pass, Michael just knew the football was going to bounce into the yard. And he knew he was going to have to get it.

That didn't mean he had to go inside the house, of course. He didn't intend to, not at first. But then one thing led to another. And before he knew it, there was no going back.

Michael was playing football with Dave and two other neighbors, Pete and Tom Brown. They always played at the end of Garden Street after school. They had had some pretty good games, and this was one of them. Both sides had already scored two touchdowns apiece.

It was first down. Michael was the receiver. When he came to the line of scrimmage, Pete went over to cover him.

‘‘Hey, lizard face,’’ snarled Pete. He’d been calling everyone ‘‘lizard face’’ for a month, since their class had gone to Reptile World for a field trip. It was supposed to be an insult. ‘‘Going to catch the ball this time?’’

‘‘With my tongue,’’ said Michael.

‘‘Just don’t try using your ear again.’’

Michael frowned. His ear still hurt from the last play, when the ball had bounced off the pavement and hit his head. Dave wasn’t exactly the best quarterback in the world. Still, Michael liked to play receiver because he was the fastest runner around. If Dave could manage to get him the ball, he could score a touchdown, no sweat.

Dave yelled, ‘‘Hike!’’ Then he dropped back to pass. Michael zipped toward the telephone pole that marked the end zone.

The throw fell short by at least ten yards. The football bounced on the street. It careened halfway up the lawn of the house with the No Trespassing sign. Michael jumped clear over the yellow tape as he followed it. He didn’t even think about trespassing.

As he scooped up the ball, he saw the front door of the house was open a few inches. He was surprised to see that, so he stopped.

‘‘What are you staring at?’’ Dave called. ‘‘Let’s get back to the game.’’

Michael pointed to the front door. ‘‘It’s open.’’

‘‘I wouldn’t go in there if I were you,’’ warned Pete. ‘‘I heard that place is haunted.’’

‘‘Haunted?’’ asked Dave. ‘‘How could that be? It’s brand new.’’

‘‘So what?’’ said Tom. ‘‘Ghosts can haunt new houses the same as old.’’

‘‘I don’t believe in ghosts,’’ said Michael. He took the football under his arm and started back toward the street.

Just then, the wind pushed against the front door. It swung open another foot or so with a loud creak.

Michael nearly dropped the football.

‘‘See, I told you it’s haunted,’’ said Pete.

‘‘I’m getting out of here,’’ said Tom, starting to run down the street toward West Bay Street. He was two years younger than the other boys.

‘‘Chicken!’’ yelled Dave.

‘‘Hey, don’t pick on my brother,’’ said Pete.

‘‘I’m not picking on him,’’ said Dave. He was trying hard not to laugh, because he really did like Tom. ‘‘But you have to admit—he ran away pretty fast. He’s still going.’’

‘‘If you’re so brave, let’s see you go inside,’’ Pete told Dave. He didn't like anyone making fun of Tom, not even a little bit.

“It's against the law,” said Dave, pointing at the signs. “I'll go to jail.”

“There aren't any police around,” said Pete. “Besides, you won't get arrested. Just yelled at. Which isn't anything to be scared of, right?”

“Unless a ghost yells at you,” said Michael. He was trying to make a joke. He still didn't believe in ghosts.

“You're just chicken,” Pete told Dave. “Aw-puck, apuck,” he added, making a chicken sound.

“Let's see you go in then,” countered Dave.

“I'm not messing with ghosts,” said Pete. “I believe in them. And this house is haunted. Everybody knows it.”

“I believe in ghosts, too,” Dave decided. “It's Michael who doesn't.”

“Why would there be ghosts here?” Michael gripped the football a little tighter. “Last year we rode our bikes right where I'm standing, before they built it. There weren't ghosts then.”

“I say it's haunted,” insisted Pete.

“Me, too,” said Dave.

Michael hated it when Dave changed his mind to side with someone else. Sometimes he had no spine.

“You guys are nuts,” said Michael. He threw the football to Dave as hard as he could.

Dave caught it in the gut. The ball nearly knocked the air out of him.

“If you don't believe in ghosts, then prove it,” Pete said to Michael. “Go close that door.”

“Maybe I will.” Michael looked at the front stoop. The door was now open at least three feet.

If there were ghosts inside, they could be hiding right behind it.

“Ghosts! Ha!” said Michael bravely. He wasn't going to be scared by a figment of someone's imagination. He had watched this house being built. The only reason people didn't live in it yet was . . .

Was what? His father had said the builders wanted too much money. But was that the only reason?

Now that he looked at the house carefully, there did seem to be something strange about it. The color was plain old brown, but it shimmered oddly in the sun. Some of the windows were round instead of square. But that didn't make it haunted—no way.

“If there aren't any ghosts, why are you afraid to close the door?” asked Pete.

“Yeah, let's see you close it, if you're so brave,” taunted Dave.

“I thought we were playing football,” said Michael.

“Chicken?” asked Pete. “I dare you.”

“No way. I just don't want to break the law.”

“How are you breaking the law?” asked Pete. “You're just closing the door. I double-dog dare you, lizard face.”

“I don't take double-dog dares,” said Michael. He had learned long ago that dares were stupid—especially double-dog ones. If someone was daring you to d something, they were too scared to do it themselves.

Or too smart.

“You’re just a chicken,” said Dave. “That’s all. A scaredy-cat. Meow, meow.” He took the football and started walking down the street. Pete began to follow him.

Michael knew he should just laugh at them. But something inside wouldn’t let him. He was very angry with Dave.

“I’m not scared,” Michael shouted without thinking. “I’ll show you—I’ll do more than close the door. I’ll go inside.”

Neither of his friends turned around. Michael was really angry now. He hated being made fun of. He would show them.

But as he took a step toward the front door, it opened another six or seven inches.

He told himself it was the wind. It *had* to be the wind.

Even so, he gulped a little as he walked toward it. And when it swung wide open, he nearly fainted.

But there was no turning back now. No way. If he chickened out, his friends would make fun of him forever.

“I’m not afraid of ghosts,” said Michael. “Or the stupid wind.”

He took a step onto the cement stoop. He was just about holding his breath.

“It’s a brand-new house,” Michael told himself. “I can smell the fresh paint. No way it can be haunted.”

Michael could see from the corner of his eye that his friends were pretending to ignore him. That made him even madder.

Suddenly, he had an idea. The only way to close the door now was to take a step inside the front hallway. And if he was going to do that, he might just as well go in the house. And if he did that, he could go to the window on the side of the house, open it, and yell at his friends.

But not just yell. He would get them back for teasing him. He would tell them that a ghost had grabbed his legs. That would scare them, but good. Then he would be the one who made fun of *them* forever.

As long as there really wasn’t a ghost inside.

Michael looked at the door carefully, then glanced around the yard. The leaves in the trees rustled.

See, he said to himself. It was the wind. That was the only explanation. The dumb wind. Nothing to be scared of.

Boldly, Michael took a step inside the house. He listened for a second. When he heard nothing, he took another step, then another.

He had just started to smile when the door crashed shut.

Even as he screamed, he felt the house moving around him.

2

Michael fell to his knees, knocked off balance. Everything was spinning. He felt like he was on an amusement park ride. The house pitched around him, turning like a toy top.

I have to get out of here, Michael told himself. He threw himself back toward the door. But it was locked solid. Superman couldn't have budged it.

Michael banged with all his might, yelling to his friends outside to get him out. But there was no answer.

The first idea that came into his head was that the earth had been hit by a giant asteroid and knocked off its orbit. Then he had another idea. He remembered the scene in the movie *The Wizard of Oz,* when Dorothy's house is taken to Oz by a tornado. The house was lifted up and spun around—exactly what seemed to be happening to him now.

That's just a movie, he told himself. Still, he was scared to go to the window to look out. About the last thing he wanted to see right now was an old woman on a bicycle turning into a witch on a broomstick.

I don't believe in ghosts or witches, he insisted to himself. Taking the first, off-balance step toward the window, he shouted out loud: ''I don't believe in ghosts or witches!''

The house didn't seem to care. It just kept whipping around. Michael slipped and hit the floor as he headed to the large front window. Groaning, he put his hands on the window ledge and pulled himself up to look outside.

The world beyond the window wasn't spinning. It wasn't clouding up, or whirling in a windstorm either. In fact, there wasn't a world there at all—just strange colors, broken into odd patterns. It was like looking through a kaleidoscope. Triangles of silver and red and green mixed into swirling circles of gold, which flashed into purple and black lines that flared into outrageous orange pinwheels. White speckles appeared, burning holes into the collage of colors.

Then everything went pitch black. In the next second, Michael felt an electric charge surge through his body. He was tossed from the window like a rag doll. The last thing he thought before the back of his head hit the floor was this: that's what I get for taking a double-dog dare.

* * *

Michael blinked his eyes open. The house had stopped moving. Everything was silent. He craned his neck upwards and looked first to the left, then to the right. Whatever had happened was over. No harm had come to the house.

He seemed to be OK, too. The blow to his head wasn't severe. He had a few bruises, but nothing serious. He didn't even have a headache.

Still, he took his time getting up. The eerie silence filled him with dread. Standing in the middle of the living room, he carefully checked each part of his body to make sure he was all right. Then he walked toward the front window. He didn't know what to expect. A tiny part of him thought there might even be Munchkins outside, like in the movie about the Wizard of Oz.

At least if I'm in Oz, he told himself, I'll know what to expect because I saw the film.

But Michael wasn't in Oz. In fact, when he looked out the window, he saw that he was back home—or had never left. Everything looked exactly as it had when he'd entered the house. Mrs. Ferro's house was still directly across the street. The leaves were still fluttering on her trees. And the flowers in her front yard still bloomed beneath the trellis.

Funny thing, though—as Michael stared at the flowers, he realized something odd. Mrs. Ferro had given him permission to pick some of those flowers just a few days before for his mom's birthday present. He could still remember his mother saying they were the best present she'd gotten.

And he could also remember her saying that their color matched her shirt. Which was blue.

But these flowers were yellow.

I must be remembering wrong, he told himself. Then he shook his head. All of the signs on the lawn and the yellow tape were exactly as they had been.

Maybe I had a dizzy spell, Michael thought to himself. His Aunt Madeline was always having them. A lot of times she would have to go upstairs and rest during parties. Michael had never had one himself, but he figured that maybe they ran in the family.

He didn't think that would explain why the front door wasn't locked anymore. Michael didn't intend on hanging around to figure out the answer to that puzzle, though. He bolted through the doorway and took a mighty leap off the stoop.

His friends were nowhere in sight. Michael turned back to look at the house. It sure seemed solid. And except for a few puffy clouds, the sky was empty: no sign of a storm.

One thing about the sky did seem rather odd. It wasn't quite blue. The color was a light gray. Maybe, Michael thought, there had been a storm outside after all.

Just as he'd decided he'd had better head home, a police siren wailed from less than a block away. Michael started to run and instantly became entangled in the ''Do Not Trespass'' tape.

Great, he thought to himself as he pulled it off. I must have set off an alarm in the house. The police are coming to arrest me for trespassing.

Michael ripped the tape in two and started running toward the far end of the cul-de-sac. The empty lot there had a path that led around to Old Redding Road, not far from the school. If he could make it before the police arrived, they'd never spot him. Then he could take the long way home.

The path through the woods was a shortcut he took nearly every day with his friends. The boys would cross at the edge of the yard and jump over a low evergreen bush. Michael hit his stride as he neared the bush. He was very excited—he would have quite a story for his buddies when he met up with them tomorrow.

He bounded over the bush like a long jumper in the Olympics. But as he pulled his feet together for the landing, he realized that somehow he had miscalculated. He landed right in the middle of the hedge.

Falling sideways, Michael landed splat on the nubby green branches. Tumbling clear, he examined the shrub with surprise.

He jumped over this shrub nearly every day. In fact, he had gone over it just this morning on his way to school. But now that he looked at it, he realized it was nearly ten feet wide—much too far to jump. Somehow, in the space of a day, it had grown, not up but out.

Mom would love some of that fertilizer, he thought.

The siren was now much closer. He heard tires squealing. The police must be heading straight toward him. Michael jumped to his feet and bolted for the woods.

In all his life, Michael had never gotten into trouble

with the police. He was scared that he might be taken to jail.

As he reached the path he heard the car screech to a halt in the street. Michael didn't stop. As he ran, his heart pounded in his chest faster than the pistons in a race car.

He burst through the trees and onto Old Redding Road. In the distance he could hear some dogs barking. There didn't seem to be anyone following him when he glanced back. After running a few more yards, his side started to hurt. He slowed down to a trot.

Pleasantville School was ahead on his right. At least it should have been. But when he glanced toward it, he saw that another building was there instead.

It was about the same size as his school, but it was very different. In fact, it looked more like an upside-down bathtub than a building. The windows on the ground floor were round. And instead of bricks the walls seemed to be made of gray metal.

Michael turned and looked at the houses across the street. They were exactly right—all one-story houses with black roofs. The soccer field to the left of the school looked right, too. It had recently been lined, and the soccer cages were still up. Everything looked the same as it had when class was dismissed a few hours before.

Except for the school. Michael walked toward it slowly, wondering what was going on. He stepped up onto the concrete curb, and took several steps toward the front door. Just then, he happened to glance at the message board in the school's front yard. Notices of upcoming events were often placed on the sign. This morning he had seen the PTA's bake sale advertised.

The bake sale and its date were there, all right. What was odd was the top of the sign. Instead of reading "Pleasantville School," it said, "Swampville School."

Michael was so surprised he read the name out loud several times.

"Swampville School?" he said. "Swampville? Is this someone's idea of a joke?"

He glanced around, expecting to see a television camera. Maybe he was on *America's Funniest Home Videos*. But no one was nearby. Then he decided to get closer and look at the sign.

It had to be someone's idea of a joke. Right away he had a candidate for the prankster: Dante Leterri. Dante was a neighbor of Michael's and a grade ahead of him. He was always pulling gags. Just last week, he had dressed up in a gorilla suit borrowed from his uncle. He wore the suit to class. Everyone thought it was pretty funny, even the teachers. They let him wear it for the entire day.

But changing the name of the school on the message board? That was going too far. That was defacing public property. Dante was sure to get into serious trouble.

Michael looked more closely at the sign. The letters were made out of metal. They were also welded into the sign. There was no way that Dante, or anyone else, could have changed them.

Even if he had, Michael realized when he looked back

at the building, nobody could transform a whole school building. There was only so much you could do for a joke.

Something weird had happened while Michael was locked inside that empty house, he realized. Maybe there *had* been a tornado. Instead of depositing him in Oz, it took him to Swampville.

Swampville. Yuk. What a name for a town.

Michael was sorry now that he had run from the police. Even if he had gotten into a little trouble for trespassing, they would have helped him.

For a moment, he felt completely alone. Then he realized that this town looked a lot like his town. In his town, if there had been a disaster or a kid was lost, lots of people would help. And when it was all over, he would have a pretty interesting story to tell his friends.

Forget about telling his friends. He'd be famous. Television shows would be lining up to meet the boy who was in the house that flew.

All he had to do was find someone nice to help him.

Michael trotted across the street to a large yellow house. It looked almost exactly like the house that was across the street from the school in his town. As a matter of fact, it was an exact duplicate, except for the round windows over the door.

As he rang the bell, Michael rehearsed his speech. "Excuse me," he planned to say. "Something weird has happened. I'm lost. I come from Pleasantville. Do you think you could call my parents for me? Or maybe the police?"

After he rang the bell a second time, he heard footsteps coming. He could see the swirl of a brown dress through the glass panel at the side of the door.

It won’t be long now, he thought. I’m going to be the most famous kid in school. Maybe even the most famous kid in America.

“Who is it?” asked a woman behind the door.

“Excuse me,” said Michael. He forgot his speech and the words stuttered out. “Something—I mean, I’m, uh, lost. Can you help me?”

“Oh, you poor dear,” said the woman, unlocking the door.

Michael smiled as the door opened.

In the next second, he shrieked in horror.

The person at the door had the body of a woman and the face of a lizard.

3

Michael’s terror leapt from his lungs to his heart. His blood stopped pumping. The kidneys inside his body froze solid. His legs began to quiver. And his mouth felt like it was filled with week-old Jell-O.

Lime Jell-O. With way too much sugar.

“Are you all right, little boy?” asked the woman. She blinked her large, reptilian eyes and wrinkled her short brown nose. Her scale-encrusted face tilted to the side as Michael stood there, unable to answer.

His mind was sending an urgent message to his feet: RUN! RUN! RUN! But his feet refused to move.

“Are you sick?” the lizard lady asked. Her tongue flicked out of her mouth. It was long and forked, exactly like a reptile’s.

That did it. Michael’s feet finally got the message. They didn’t run—they flew. He zipped across the street, not even glancing to see if traffic might be coming.

“Hey, you idiot kid!” screamed a driver as he hit the brakes. His car skidded to a stop bare inches from Michael. Michael glanced over his shoulder at the man, who was yelling and shaking his fist.

The man had a lizard face, too.

I’ve gone crazy, Michael thought as he bolted across the school lawn. He turned the corner toward the back of the building. There he collapsed to catch his breath.

And to figure out what he’d just seen.

The person who had come to the door seemed like a real woman in every way. She wore a dress. She had hands and arms. She spoke in a normal voice.

But her face had been the face of a lizard.

Was it just a mask?

If so, it was pretty convincing. Halloween was six months away—why would she be wearing one to answer the door?

That tongue didn’t seem like something you could fake. And even if the lady had on a mask, what about the man in the car? He had a lizard face, too.

Michael remembered the gecko he’d held in his hand on the class trip to Reptile World. It had very small scales that looked slimy but were dry when he touched them. Its tiny tongue spit out from its mouth. The gecko was one of the world’s smallest lizards. There were about three thousand other species, including chameleons, iguanas, and the giant monitor lizard.

But lizard people? No way. Nosuchathing, as his

friend Dave would say. It couldn’t be possible. He must have been seeing things. Maybe that knock on the head in the house had done some real damage.

Michael got up and began walking around the back of the building. There was a similar walkway in his schoolyard. At home, it led to a park and a monument to the man who had founded the town more than a hundred years before.

Michael wasn’t sure what it would lead to here. He knew that there weren’t too many schools with parks or monuments behind them. So when he saw that this path also led to a park, he was very surprised.

He was also relieved, because he didn’t see any more lizard people. In fact, the park was empty. He walked down the gray steps to a gravel path. It was very similar to the one that was behind his own school, but there were some small differences. For instance, the water fountain at the edge of the flower beds was shaped like a triangle instead of a rectangle. And the benches, instead of being made out of wood, were constructed from some sort of metal.

Another thing struck him as odd. Usually when he walked down this path in his hometown, he had to shoo geese out of the way. The birds were a major nuisance. The town had tried everything to get rid of them. The mayor had even hired a collie dog to herd them away.

But there were no geese here. There weren’t any other birds, either. He stopped still and listened for a moment, but could hear no chirping, no cawing, not even a stray cock-a-doodle-do.

OK, he told himself, maybe the birds are just sleeping nearby. Or maybe they have a collie who does a better job than ours does.

Michael continued down the path toward the large statue at the center of the park. In his hometown, the statue was of a man named Colonel William Bebeef. Colonel Bebeef had founded the town shortly after the Civil War. He had also been given money to build the school and the library.

Everyone who lived in Pleasantville had heard his life story about a million times. After the war he was very poor. He happened to help a young boy who was lost and the boy turned out to be the son of one of the richest men in America. The rich man was so grateful he gave Colonel Bebeef a great deal of money. Colonel Bebeef used it to start the town and help out his neighbors.

Just thinking about the story made Michael feel hopeful. He walked a little faster toward the statue, wondering whom the people of this town had honored. Just as in his town, there was a plaque with an inscription by the feet of the statue. The words were written in small letters, and Michael had to get pretty close to read them.

He nearly fell backwards when he read the first words of the inscription:

Colonel William Bebeef, founder and benefactor of Swampville . . .

Immediately, he looked up at the face of the statue. It was Colonel Bebeef, all right. But with a lizard face.

* * *

Frozen in shock, Michael stayed at the foot of the statue for nearly five minutes, until his eardrums began vibrating with the shriek of a siren. Even then, his mind wasn't working quite right. He turned and looked around the park, unsure where he was or what was happening.

A dark brown-and-yellow car screeched onto the gravel behind the school at the edge of the park. A bar of red lights walloped the air as two policemen threw open the doors.

"Halt!" screamed one.

Under ordinary circumstances, Michael would have obeyed a policeman. But these circumstances weren't ordinary. The policemen weren't ordinary either—they had lizard heads.

As he twisted away, Michael tripped over his own feet. He flew headfirst to the ground. Clawing at the grass, he managed to get up and get going. His thighs pumped like the wheels on a diesel locomotive. His arms slashed the air like the blades of a propeller. Lightning couldn't have moved faster than he did.

Beyond the park lay an overgrown field with tall grass, weeds, bushes, and even a few trees. Michael threw himself into the nearest weeds with a mighty leap, hoping to hide himself from his pursuers. But they kept right on after him.

"Halt!" they yelled. "Stop! You're under arrest for violating District Regulation One!"

Michael wasn't even curious about what District Regulation One might be. He bolted further into the field, skipping over a small stream and bursting through some bushes. Then he tripped over an old tree trunk. Wh he looked up, he found himself staring into a pair o evil-looking eyes.

"Meow."

The eyes belonged to the largest Siamese cat Micha had ever seen. Most lions were smaller than this cat.

Michael got to his knees and began to back away.

"Meow," repeated the cat. It took half a step and wa barely a foot from him. Its huge teeth glistened in the su

Then it licked his face.

"Meow," said the cat, starting to purr.

"Yuk," said Michael, cat slime all over his cheek. He didn't have time to wipe it all off, either—he could hear the lizard police closing in.

An old apple tree stood a few yards away. Desperate Michael ran to the tree and jumped onto a branch, boosting himself up. It wasn't exactly the best hiding place in the world, but Michael knew he couldn't run much further.

The lizard police stopped short when they saw the cat. It meowed at them as it had at Michael.

"Dumb cat," said one of the police.

Michael watched in horror as the policeman took a gun from his holster and aimed it at the animal. Before he could yell a warning to the poor creature, the policeman fired.

A green ray flashed from the gun and the gigantic cat froze solid in the grass.

"I wish people wouldn't let their pets off the leash," said the policeman. His lizard tongue flicked through the air. "It's an annoyance for everyone."

"People never learn," said the other policeman, shaking his scaly head. "Come on, let's find this trespasser before he gets away."

Michael hugged the tree branch tighter than a bear cub clinging to its mother. He didn't dare breathe. The two policemen walked directly toward the tree. They looked exactly like the policemen in his hometown—except for the lizard faces.

And the color of their uniforms. They were brown, not blue.

Michael was no more than six feet off the ground. There were, at most, four leaves shielding him from view. Even a mole could see him if it looked in his direction.

With the policemen approaching, he dared not move an inch. He was too petrified. Their faces looked just like the woman's. Scaly and wrinkled, brown with green specks, they reminded Michael of the gecko.

Their tongues flicked the air. Michael knew from the trip to Reptile World that lizards used their tongues as sensory organs. They flicked into the air, gathering chemical particles. The tongue was then placed against something in the lizard's mouth called "Jacobson's organ." That organ worked like a combination of a nose and taste buds. Depending on the lizard, it could be very sensitive. If the slightest odor was left in the air or on the ground, the lizard tongue could snatch it up, just like a bloodhound.

But there was nothing he could do about that now. Michael held his breath and wished with every ounce of his body that they would keep walking.

And they did. Right by his tree, one on each side. He was so happy he wanted to shout with joy.

Of course, if he had done that, they would have he him. So Michael kept his mouth clamped tight. He co tinued to hug the tree, watching them move away.

"Must have gone back to the neutral zone," said o of the lizard policemen.

"Yeah. No sense searching anymore."

"It's time for us to take our dinner break, anyway."

"I hope my wife has supper waiting," said the liz cop. "It's her turn to cook."

"Oh yeah? What's for dinner?"

"Thursday is pasta night."

"Not bad. We always have fried caterpillar heads o Thursdays."

"Excellent."

Fried caterpillar heads? Michael almost lost his gr on the tree just thinking about that.

Good thing he didn't. The policemen were walkin right back in his direction. Once again he held his breath. Once again they missed him, even though their tongues cracked through the air and their eyes circled all around. For some reason, they never looked up, though the tree was right next to them.

Michael eased himself down once he heard the car start up in the distance. There was no time to celebrate his good fortune. He decided he had to find a safe hiding place where he could figure out what was going on. He walked deeper into the field, in the opposite direction from the school.

Different ideas of what might have happened flipped through his head as he went. It was as if he were sitting

in a library and fanning through the pages of many different books.

Maybe he'd fallen asleep and was dreaming this. Maybe hitting his head had knocked his eyes out of whack. Maybe he had been picked up by a tornado and deposited in a weird part of the world no one had ever heard of before.

The *Wizard of Oz* movie kept coming back again and again. But these weren't Munchkins, and there didn't seem to be any witches, good or bad. At least not yet. Everyone seemed to be pretty normal—except for their lizard heads.

The giant cat was pretty weird, though. And the lizard policemen had called it a pet.

The cat was still standing alone in the field, frozen behind him like a statue. He didn't want to get zapped by the policemen's guns, that was for sure.

After he had walked for about ten minutes, Michael came to a chain-link fence. He climbed the fence and saw a bunch of old warehouse buildings on the other side. They appeared deserted. All of them were broken down and in shambles. They would be as good a place to hide as any, he decided.

Michael slipped over the fence and jumped down to the other side. Glass crinkled beneath his sneakers. The faint odor of rusted metal and burnt rubber hung in the air. The buildings before him looked as if they had been in a war.

As he trotted toward them, Michael began to feel a little hungry. It would be getting toward dinner time back home.

All at once, he began thinking about his mom and dad and his kid sister. Then his friends popped into his head. He began to feel very sad and sorry that he was so far away from them. He wondered if he would ever get back.

Michael was still feeling sad as he approached the old buildings. They were made out of bricks, but they seemed to be hundreds of years old. Some were crumbling into dust. Grass was growing between others, right up the wall.

If there had ever been roads leading to the buildings, they were long gone. Now there were only piles and piles of rubble—bricks and stones, dead trees, lots of metal. Michael picked his way carefully toward what seemed to be the front of the building.

The door and windows had vanished long ago. Now there were only large, gaping holes in the front of the building. It was as if the real doors and windows had faded away, and only the idea of them remained.

Michael stepped inside. Except for two small piles of bricks, the floor was spotlessly clean. The gray cement looked as if it had been washed within the hour.

I can hide here for a while, Michael thought to himself, taking a step inside. *No one will find me.*

At that instant, he heard a voice bark out behind him.

"Don't move, youngster," it said. "Put your hands up!"

The command was followed by a sharp poke in his back. A round piece of metal like a gun barrel had been placed against his shoulder.

4

Michael was too scared to even gulp. He lifted his arms slowly upwards. He felt about as helpless as a yellow jacket trapped inside a jar of honey.

"What are you doing here?" demanded the voice behind him. "Speak!"

"I'm n-not doing anything," he said.

"Turn around so I can get a good look at you."

Maybe it's a human, Michael thought to himself. *Maybe it will turn out to be someone from my town.*

The idea cheered him up a little. Michael slowly turned around. He closed his eyes as he did, not daring to look.

"What do you have your eyes closed for?" demanded his captor. "Open 'em up!"

Michael did.

Before him was an old man dressed in ragged clothes.

With a lizard face.
That's when everything went black.

Michael was unconscious for a little while. It was a if he were sleeping. The next thing he knew, he could smell a campfire. Something was being roasted on it. It smelled a little like the chicken his dad cooked on the backyard barbecue for the Fourth of July.

Carefully, Michael opened his right eye. Then he opened his left one. All he could see was the sky above. It was a pale yellow-gray, the way the sky looks sometimes right before nightfall.

He was lying on his back. The ground was hard beneath him. He turned his head slightly and saw that he was in the building he had entered before. Someone—or something—had covered him with a blanket. A rolled-up towel had been placed under his head.

A murmur of voices came from the far end of the large, open room he was in. Michael couldn't see who was there without rolling onto his side or getting up. He was too scared to move at first.

Gradually, he worked up his courage. He pulled his legs together and propped himself up with his arm. Four adults were huddled around a fire in the corner. Their backs were toward him. Something on a spit was being turned over the fire.

The men spoke in low voices. Every so often, a few of them laughed.

All of their clothes seemed to be tattered. They were little more than rags.

The sun was now near the horizon, and threw more shadows than light across the building. It was hard to see into the corner. Very quietly, Michael rose and took a step toward them.

He caught a glimpse of one man as he laughed.

He had a lizard head.

The others turned toward him.

All were lizards.

"You're up," said one of the lizard men. He put down the cup he had been holding and started toward Michael.

Michael took a step backwards.

"I didn't mean to scare you before," the lizard man apologized. His voice sounded kindly. It reminded Michael a little of Mr. Fisher, one of his neighbors. Mr. Fisher was a real nice guy, always helping Michael's dad and sometimes giving Michael a lift to school in his pickup truck. He was older than Michael's parents, and very nice.

"Are you OK, youngster?" asked the lizard man.

Because he reminded Michael of his neighbor, Michael didn't feel quite as afraid as before. He nodded slowly.

"I'm sorry I put the pipe on your shoulder," he said. "We've had trouble with hooligans."

"H-hooligans?" Michael stuttered.

"Young rascals who are trying to bother us. Some come here to steal things. You're not one of them, are you?"

"No," said Michael.

“I didn’t think so.” The lizard man smiled. H tongue flicked in the air. The teeth in his mouth we small, and from the distance looked like miniature chi els. But the rest of him looked very human.

“Come,” said the lizard man. “You’re among friends.”

“I am?”

“Yes. Have something to eat with us.”

Michael’s fear changed to something like curiosity. He had a lot of questions he wanted to ask these guys. They seemed harmless. After all, if they were going to hurt him, they could have easily attacked when he was sleeping. They could have—gulp—eaten him without him ever knowing it.

“Are you hungry?” asked another of the lizard men.

“I, I guess I am,” Michael said.

Slowly, he walked toward the group. They were sitting down on large stones they had brought in from outside. The kindly lizard man who had found Michael gave him his.

Michael wasn’t quite brave enough to stare at the men’s faces. He was afraid that they might think it rude. So he glanced at them out of the corner of his eyes. He realized that, although their faces were all similar, there were small differences. For instance, their noses were either bigger or smaller, and the scales on their cheeks a little pointier or a little rounder. They didn’t pay much attention to him. This surprised him a little. He thought that they ought to be at least as curious about him as he was about them.

“I forgot to introduce myself,” said the kindly lizard man. He stuck out his hand for Michael to shake. “Name’s Sam. Sam the man with a helping hand. At least that’s what my friends call me.”

Michael looked at the lizard’s hand. It definitely looked like a normal, human being hand.

Would it feel like one, he wondered. What if it felt slimy? What if he screamed in terror? Would they eat him?

You’re being silly, Michael told himself. You better shake his hand before he gets mad at you.

Cautiously, he put his hand out to shake. Then he Sam the lizard man pulled his back quickly. Then he began to laugh.

“Stop teasing the kid,” growled one of the other lizard men. “You’re always busting on someone.”

Sam clapped Michael on the back and then took his hand. It felt exactly like a human hand.

“Just kidding you, son,” laughed Sam. “What’s your name?”

“Michael.”

“Michael the likeable, quick as a bicycle,” said Sam. “Have a piece of meat. Jess, get out a plate for our young guest here.”

Despite his fear, Michael soon found himself cutting a piece of meat and chewing it hungrily. It tasted pretty good, though he thought it could have used a little salt.

The lizard men were quiet while they ate. They didn’t even tell any jokes as they had before.

Michael guessed that these men were like hobos. He had learned about them in history class. Hobos were homeless men who went from town to town during the Depression in the 1930s. Of course, those had been human men, not lizard men.

“I have a few questions for you,” he said. “Do you mind if I ask them?”

“Watch now, we don’t talk with our mouth full,” said Sam. “Eat your dog.”

Dog?

At the word, Michael nearly became sick. He put his plate down on the ground next to his rock. His intestines did a belly flop into his stomach.

“What’s wrong?” asked Sam.

“D-did you say, dog?”

“Sure, dog. Can’t you tell?”

“I, I thought it was chicken.”

The other men laughed. “Chicken?” said one. “What do we look like, rich?”

“Yeah, and this is a fancy palace,” said another.

They all laughed.

“Go ahead, son, it’s fresh,” said Sam. “The butcher in this district is a friend of mine. He gives me leftovers if I clean up the shop for him. The chief of police himself doesn’t have finer meat.”

Michael looked at the plate. Not only had he eaten nearly all of the food they’d given him, but he had even liked it.

Dog!

“I, I can’t finish it,” said Michael. “I think I might be sick.”

“Why?” asked Sam.

“I—we don’t eat dogs where I come from.”

“Where’s that?” asked one.

“I don’t know. It’s far away.”

“We’re all from far away,” said another.

“I’m from much further away than you,” said Michael.

“How do you know that?” asked Sam.

“I—well, look at my face. Can’t you see I’m different from you?”

“We’re all different in our own way,” said Sam.

The others agreed.

“No! I’m really different. I’m not a lizard!” shouted Michael. He jumped up and ran, determined to get away from these creatures. He was disgusted and shocked.

Why can’t they see that I’m a human, he asked himself as he ran.

He saw the answer as soon as he turned the corner and caught his reflection in a jagged piece of glass.

He had a lizard head just like everyone else.

5

A cold shudder flashed through Michael's body. It was the electricity of fear, shocking every cell he possessed. His blood stopped flowing for a second, as he contemplated this new horror.

I am one of them.

The words formed in the hollow, open space of his brain.

I am a lizard kid.

Never in his worst nightmare could he have imagined something like this. Never could he have wished it on his worst enemy, not even on mean Steve Morrison, who used to beat him up every week in first grade.

Thousands of questions flashed through Michael's mind:

How did this happen?

How can I get back to normal?

How will I go home?

His thoughts crashed together like a traffic jam. His brain cells were swimming with contradictions. He couldn't think. He just ran.

He ran through the rubble-filled field surrounding the old warehouse. He ran over the asphalt and the broken glass. He ran without paying attention to the growing shadows around him. He ran like a bullet flies. Nothing could stop him.

Michael ran back toward the fence he had climbed over. When he got within five feet, he leaped. The old, rusty chainlinks caught him. He gripped the metal and hauled himself over with a quick puff of breath.

He lost his footing when he hit the ground. Trying to keep his balance, he whacked his arm hard. It hurt so much that he had to stop and rest.

After he caught his breath, he calmed down a bit. I can't be a lizard kid, he told himself. I feel just the same. Maybe I saw someone else's reflection in the glass.

He started to put his hands to his face, then stopped. He was too scared of what he might feel. It would be better to see what he looked like first. So he got up and began looking for a mirror, or something else to see his reflection in. An old piece of metal was on the ground nearby. He picked it up, but it wasn't shiny enough to show him anything more than a blur.

Walking along the fence, he found an old Christmas tree, dry and forlorn in the weeds. A few needles clung to its branches, like friends who refused to deser buddy.

There were some strands of tinsel on it. Michae picked them up gingerly. He couldn't see much of reflection in them. But what he could see looked sca and green.

"No!" he shouted out loud. "It can't be! It can' be!"

He threw the tinsel down and walked some more. Finally he saw a small pond not far away. He ran over to it. Throwing himself down by the shore, he closed his eyes and edged close to the water. For the longe time, he dared not look.

When he finally opened his eyes, he couldn't see anything. The sun's reflection dazzled him. It glanced directly off the surface, a blinding light.

This has all been a trick of my eyes, Michael thought. He started to get up, feeling much better.

As he did, the angle of light changed. His reflection in the pond was clear and crisp.

He was a lizard, all right. With a forked tongue that snapped in the air as he gaped at his image.

Michael put his hands to his face. The scales felt warm and soft. Gingerly, he traced the outline of his skull with his fingers. His eyes felt as if they had been pushed back further on his head, and tilted slightly to the sides. They were round, and he didn't have any eyebrows. His nose was more a bump in the middle of his face than a regular nose.

He tried to think of everything he had ever learned about lizards and reptiles, but it didn't amount to all that much. There was one really important thing. Lizards were cold-blooded. That didn't mean that they were cold all the time. It meant that they got most of their heat from outside of themselves. Their body temperature could vary, depending on what the temperature was around them. The colder they were, the slower their bodies moved. And if it was warm outside, then they had a lot of energy and could move very quickly.

Mammals—like human beings—generated their own heat from the food they ate. Their bodies stayed a constant temperature. For a person, this was 98.6 degrees. Unless it was very, very cold or very, very hot, the temperature outside didn't affect their energy.

But Michael wasn't sure whether he or the lizard people he had seen were cold-blooded. For one thing, the only part of him that seemed to be lizard-like was his head. And he felt pretty warm. Of course, the outside air seemed pretty warm, too, nearly the same temperature as a steamy hot bath.

If I ever get back to normal, he told himself, I'm going to take out every book I can in the library about lizards and animals, in case I get turned into something else. I'm going to be the smartest kid in school.

If only I can get out of this mess.

One part of him that was definitely lizard-like was his tongue. When he stuck it out, it snapped in the air. He rolled it back and pushed it against the roof of his mouth. Michael had found his Jacobson's organ, special organ that reptiles have.

The first time he did this, it was by accident. A fu sensation erupted in his head. He had tasted air.

At first, it felt like a truck filled with vanilla mi shakes had tumbled into his head. It was weird and co and great, all at the same time.

Then he started to realize there were a lot of differe parts to the taste. The ruined buildings, the broken gla even the campfire in the building nearby—they all we part of it. The biggest part, though, was warm and ary. This was the oxygen itself. It tasted pretty good

Michael spent several minutes zapping his tongue and out, taking different tastes. It was very exciting a first, but he soon became used to it. Then he felt mo homesick than ever.

He knew that somehow, he had to find a way ba home—and a way to return to being a normal kid.

Everything had started at the house on the cul-de-sa Maybe if he went back inside it, he would be changed back. It seemed to be his only hope.

He began walking back through the field toward the memorial park. The sun was sinking very low in the sky. As he neared the edge of the weeds, he heard loud noises from the park. A band started to play. It wasn't the best band in the world, but the song was very familiar.

It was the "Star-Spangled Banner."

The high school band in his hometown used the same song to begin its free spring concerts. The concerts were

held every Thursday night after dinner in the memorial park behind the school during the spring.

And this was a Thursday.

As he crept toward the park, Michael saw that there were armed lizard guards patrolling the edge of the grass. That never happened in his town, not even on Halloween. And the lizard people at the concert, instead of laughing and talking, were all silent. Even when the music stopped, they were quiet. That seemed odd to Michael. He couldn't tell from where he was, but it seemed to him that no one was having a very good time.

Back in Pleasantville, most people at the concert had a lot of fun. Even kids who really didn't like music much. You could hang out with your friends near the swing sets. But there wasn't anyone near them now, except armed guards.

The guns seemed to be larger versions of the ray guns the police had used to zap the monster cat. Michael ducked as two of the guards passed near the edge of the field, looking in his direction.

Carefully, he edged around the side of the field. The band continued to play. There were hundreds of people in the park, all perfectly still. Michael crawled slowly around the edge, hiding behind bushes and trees. It took him the longest time to get near the school.

There were guards standing in front of the building. He had to pass them to get to the road that led back to the house. There were no bushes or anything to hide him. There was no way to get around them without being seen.

I look just like them, Michael told himself. Mayb I just walk on the road, they won't say anything. Wrong.

He hadn't taken two steps when one of the gu shouted at him.

"Halt!" yelled the guard, pointing his gun at hi

The gun was silvery and, if it hadn't been aimed Michael, it might have looked kind of cool. The gu was wearing a camouflage uniform and a black b Except for his lizard face, he looked like one of t soldiers Michael had seen last year at a Memo Day parade.

"What are you doing?" the soldier demande "Where are you going?"

"I—I'm going home."

"Home? You're here to enjoy a concert. Go a enjoy it."

"B-but—"

"No buts," said the guard. "You're lucky I don' call my lieutenant. He could have you arrested and p in detention. Now go enjoy that concert!"

What kind of place is this, Michael wondered as h turned around, where armed guards ordered you to hav fun? He walked back to the memorial park.

Michael stood at the edge of the crowd. He didn' want to get too close to anyone. A few of the liza people glanced in his direction. They smiled at him p litely. No one could tell that he didn't belong.

Maybe he *did* belong. Michael wondered if his pa

ents were somewhere in the town, and if they were lizards, too.

That idea made him gulp. His tongue got tangled in his mouth just thinking that he might be stuck here forever. What would things be like then?

Michael had to get back to the house where this had all started. He had to get there, and hope for the best.

The band played for about a half hour more. While everyone was applauding the final song, Michael began walking quickly toward the exit. He kept his head down, hoping not to attract any attention.

No one said anything to him as he walked toward the front of the school. He turned left, back in the direction of the shortcut to West Bay Street. Glancing to his right, he saw a group of lizard soldiers standing by an army truck. The truck had eight huge wheels. The hood was flat, and looked like the snout of an alligator. The back was made of metal, and had a pointed top. Antennas and a radar dish stuck out the side.

Even though the air was still as warm as it had been during the day, the soldiers had started fires in some metal cans. They stood around them, talking.

Michael stuck his hands in his pockets and kept walking. He was nearing the path through the woods when he spotted a police car heading toward him. Michael wanted to glance away, but something about the car caught his attention. The word "Police" was written on the hood. Except that it was spelled "Polize," with a "z" instead of a "c." He paused for a second as he noticed the mistake.

This was one time in his life that being a good spe got Michael in trouble. The car screeched to a halt. "Hey, you look familiar," said one of the lizard police officers. "Aren't you the kid we chased this afternoon over near West Bay Street?"

Michael didn't stop to answer. He kicked his legs into high gear, dodging toward the path in the woods for all he was worth.

A commotion broke out behind him. Michael heard shouts and sirens. He ran for all he was worth.

I can make it, he told himself. *I'm a fast runner.*

About halfway down the shortcut path, he glanced back. One of the lizard policemen was just entering the woods. He had his ray gun out.

Michael ducked his head to keep from getting whacked by a branch at the end of the path. He burst through the bushes at the edge of the woods. All that lay between him and the house was the side yard.

But before Michael had taken more than three steps toward the house, two more police cars sped down the cul-de-sac. One of the cars was a station wagon. It said "K-9 patrol." Instead of having a German shepherd or a bloodhound, the lizard police released a strange-looking creature. It was about the size of a small collie, but it was nothing like Lassie, that's for sure. Its four legs were stubby sticks without knees, making it jerk along as it ran. It had a snout like an elephant, as thick as a fire hose. A spiked collar stood out above its brown fur. And as it ran, it snorted, sounding a little like a gorilla with a bad cold.

Michael turned back for the woods as soon as he saw it heading toward him. For a creature with no knees, it ran very fast. By the time he reached the woods it was only thirty feet away. Its rasping, hacking bark sounded ominous. Michael's blood froze at the gruesome sound.

Desperate, he plunged off the trail and grabbed the trunk of a young maple tree. He boosted himself up quickly, putting his legs around the trunk. He got maybe six feet from the ground before the creature headed off the path in his direction.

Michael froze. He was a goner. He looked down to the ground, hoping he could at least hold on until the police came.

The creature snorted and wheezed louder than an old vacuum cleaner with hiccups. Michael tightened his arms around the tree. He watched as the animal wedged itself through the underbrush and stopped directly below him. Its long nose flailed in the air like a question mark. The creature's hind feet scratched at the dirt—and then it bounded away.

The policemen followed. Michael could hardly believe his luck. Once again, he'd managed to escape because the policemen didn't look up. As soon as they were out of sight, he slid down the tree. Quickly, he ran back toward the house.

I hope this works, he thought, looking back to make sure the police lizards weren't following him.

It was the last thought he had before he felt a strong, thick arm grab him around the waist.

6

“You *are* the one we chased this afternoon,” said a gruff voice. “You’re coming with us.”

“B-but I didn’t do anything,” protested Michael.

The lizard policeman didn’t bother answering. He picked Michael up and carried him under his arms like a bundle of old newspapers.

Michael was too stunned to do more than whimper. “Let me go,” he said. “I don’t belong here!”

“Tell it to the judge,” said the policeman as he opened the back of the patrol car. “You should have thought about all the trouble you’d get into before you left home.”

“But I didn’t leave home. Not on purpose. I was playing football, see, and the ball went up on the lawn and—”

“Football? Come on, kid, at least come up with a good story.”

“But it’s the truth!”

The police officer laid him head first onto the seat, then folded up his legs and closed the car door.

“I didn’t do anything!” protested Michael.

“Tell it to the judge,” said the policeman again.

All right, Michael decided, he would. He’d tell him everything. How he’d been a regular kid with a human face until a few hours ago. Then he’d gone into that stupid house and everything had changed.

I’m guilty of trespassing, he would confess. But that’s it. I don’t know how I got to be in lizard land.

Michael wondered if the judge—or anyone—would believe him.

What if the situation were reversed? he thought. What if a lizard kid was transformed into a human being? What would people do when he tried to tell them his story?

Probably think he had made it all up.

Michael was even starting to wonder if he had ever been a human. Maybe everything that he thought was his real life was just a dream. He had no way of proving that he had been a human kid. Forget about the judge—he couldn’t even convince himself.

But of course he had proof, he realized. He had his wallet. And inside was a picture of himself and his family.

Michael fumbled in his pocket for the wallet. He’d gotten it as a birthday present last year. The only things he kept in it were an ID card with his name, and the family picture. His hands started trembling as he got it out and prepared to look inside.

I can't look, he said. I couldn't bear finding out that my life, my friends, my parents and even my little sister were all things I dreamed up.

Well, he could live without his sister. But that was it.

Michael stared at the outside of the wallet. He knew his friends weren't figments of his imagination. His parents weren't. School wasn't. Not even his dumb sister was.

No matter what the picture might say.

He cracked open the wallet.

There, beneath a slightly scratched piece of plastic, was the photograph.

Michael and his family. All normal human beings.

“Kind of quiet back there,” said the lizard policeman who was driving the car. He was bigger than the one who had put Michael in the car, but he seemed a little nicer. “You OK?”

“Uh-huh.”

Michael glanced at the photo one more time, then stuck it into his pocket. He knew he might have to give the police his wallet, and wanted to make sure he kept the photo. He didn't think it was safe to trust anyone but the judge.

“Don't be too worried, kid. What's your name?”

“Michael.”

“Got a last name?”

“Michael Roglitz. I don't live aroun

“Be careful—anything you say can and will be used against you.” The lizard policeman turned and smiled. “My name is Officer Bob Anthony.”

“What's going to happen to me?”

“Well, if you're from our district, we'll call your parents from the station and they'll come get you. No harm done. You have to be careful, getting separated from your parents. What if there were a sudden frost? You know your body can become sluggish without warning. You're not even wearing a jacket.”

“I'm not from around here,” Michael said.

Officer Anthony glanced in his rearview mirror. “You look kind of young to be a district trespasser,” he said. “If you are, you'll be released into the neutral zone. You don't want to be sent there, do you?”

“The neutral zone?”

“The wasteland between the districts,” Officer Anthony seemed confused. “Didn't your parents ever tell you about it?”

“No,” said Michael.

Officer Anthony now seemed concerned. Michael could tell he thought Michael was lying. But Michael didn't know how to explain what had happened.

“I'll put in a good word for you,” said the policeman. “You remind me of my kid brother.”

Michael thanked him. He didn't know what else to do.

Watching out the window as they drove, he saw that the roads here were almost exactly like the ones in Pleasantville. The buildings were a lot alike, too. Most of the differences were things that you might not notice at first, at least if you weren't thinking about them. Like the round windows in the houses. And the fact that the color blue did not seem to exist anywhere.

Plus, everyone was a lizard. Hard to ignore that.

‘‘OK, young'un, out you go,’’ said Officer Anthony, when the car pulled up to headquarters. Michael slid over and got out. Even if he had been planning to run away, he quickly saw that escape was impossible. There were lizard policemen all over the place. And a moat surrounded the parking lot.

Michael followed the policeman inside. He had never been inside a police station before, but he guessed this wasn't much different from the one in his hometown. The furniture was all made of metal and the walls seemed to be plaster. A fat policeman sat at the front desk, with a grumpy look on his lizard face.

‘‘Name?’’ demanded the officer at the desk. He was the barracks commander. He had a gruff voice.

‘‘Uh, I—’’

‘‘What's the matter kid, you don't know your own name?’’

‘‘Michael Roglitz, sir.’’

‘‘That's better. What's your address?’’

‘‘Seven West Bay Street,’’ he said, giving his real address in Pleasantville.

‘‘Phone number?’’

Michael gave it.

‘‘Commander, can I talk to you a second?’’ asked

Officer Anthony. He bent down and whispered something in the barracks commander's ear.

The commander frowned.

‘‘That your real address, kid?’’

‘‘Yes,’’ Michael said. ‘‘But it's not in Swampville. I live in a town called Pleasantville and—’’

‘‘Yeah, right.’’ The barracks commander shook his head. ‘‘I've seen kids like you before. You think it's so great to run away from home. You watch too much TV.’’

‘‘But I don't come from here. I can prove it!’’

‘‘That's enough. Take him to the holding cell.’’ The commander gestured to Officer Anthony. ‘‘You want to be treated like a district trespasser? Fine. We'll put you in the cell. Now if you say anything else, one of us is going to testify against you. You want us to do that?’’

Michael wasn't sure what they could possibly say against him. Still, his best bet seemed to be to keep his mouth shut until he saw the judge. He shook his head.

‘‘Very good. Empty your pockets.’’

Michael handed over the wallet. He kept his photo tucked in his back pocket.

The barracks commander placed the wallet into a plastic bag and sealed it. He sighed. His voice seemed to get a little friendlier. ‘‘Officer Anthony, take the kid back to the jail cell. Get him something to drink. You like mint soda, kid?’’

‘‘I-I guess.’’

‘‘Well, all we got is mint, plum, and gingerberry,’’ said the barracks commander. ‘‘Take your pick.’’

“I'll try plum,” he said.

Michael followed along quietly as he was led down the hallway toward the back of the building. Officer Anthony got him a soda, then took him to the jail cell.

“Here you go, son.”

“When will I see the judge?”

“Soon, soon,” said the policeman.

The door slammed shut with a crash so loud Michael nearly jumped. He was all alone. Michael sat on the bottom bunk, wishing for the hundredth time that he hadn't gone into that stupid house.

The only light in the cell came from a window opposite the cell door. When Michael finished the soda—which was pretty good—he went to the window. It looked out onto the parking lot. A row of cars, all with the word “Police” spelled as “Polize” sat below.

Even though he was lonely, Michael was glad he was the only one in the jail cell. He had heard plenty of stories about the bad things that happen in jail. He was afraid that another prisoner would beat him up. Worse, he was worried that someone might try and steal the photo.

He sat back on the bunk and checked to make sure it was still in his pocket. He had just taken it out when he heard someone coming down the hall. His heart jumped with hope—maybe they were going to take him to the judge.

Then he heard the sounds of a struggle outside. There was a fight going on.

“Come on, come on,” said a rough voice. “Get his

hands, get his hands. Quick, throw him into the cell while I go get the barracks commander. I hate these bums. Always bothering law-abiding citizens. And this one's a fighter.”

When Michael heard that, his lizard tongue nearly froze in his mouth. Then the door to the cell flew open and the new prisoner was tossed inside like an angry polecat.

7

Michael cowered in his bunk. He was more scared than he had been since the door to the strange house on the cul-de-sac slammed shut.

The other prisoner pounded and pounded on the door, demanding to be let out.

"Let me go or I'll punch you out! I'll cream you! Do you hear me? I'll pulverize you!"

Michael pulled the covers over his head. He had nowhere to go, nowhere to hide.

The door pounding stopped. He sensed that the lizard prisoner was looking at him. Then the covers were yanked off him.

"Don't hurt me!" Michael screamed, closing his eyes in fright. "I'm just a poor little kid!"

"You're never poor if you have friends," said the lizard man softly.

Michael blinked open his eyes. It was Sam, the kindly old lizard man who had befriended him in the warehouse.

"Y-you!"

"Sam the man, out-foxing the guards with a monster scam," he said, smiling. "If I can't fool them, no one can."

Sam sat down on the bunk. "Hope I didn't scare you with my act," said Sam. "I had to make sure they put me in the jail cell. Sometimes they just release old geezers like me. Boy, these jails haven't changed in years." He patted the top bunk.

"What are you doing here?"

"I let them capture me as a district trespasser, same as you. I figured it was the only way they would take me to you."

"Why do you want to see me?"

"Someone's got to tell you what's going on, don't you think? Show you the ropes? Besides, you're the only one I've ever met from the other world."

"The other world?"

"You weren't born a lizard, were you? You were born a human being. Your face used to have the same skin your hands and feet have, didn't it?"

"H-how did you know?"

"There's a lot of things old Sam knows," said the lizard man. "Sssh—someone's coming."

Sam stood up and went to the door, listening.

"Hey kid, you OK in there?" asked a lizard cop. It sounded like Officer Bob Anthony.

“Yes, sir,” said Michael.

“Is that geezer bothering you?”

“No,” said Michael.

“I wouldn’t hurt a fly,” said Sam meekly. He winked at Michael.

“You touch that kid and I’ll tie your tongue around your neck like a noose. Got it?” warned the cop.

“Got it,” said Sam the lizard man. They listened as Officer Bob Anthony walked away. “Nice fellow. At least he likes you.”

Michael nodded. Then he took out the photo of his family and showed it to the older man. When he looked at Sam’s face, he saw that he had tears in his eyes.

“Put it away. Please. Put it away,” said Sam.

“But—”

“I was once a person, too. Put it away. Please.”

They sat on the bunk for a long time. Neither of them said anything. Tears slipped down Sam’s face. Michael felt very sad, too. Even though he hadn’t known Sam for very long, he knew he must be a good man—or lizard. Sam had tried to help him. He was the first friend Michael had made here. And Michael didn’t like to see anyone, especially a friend, hurt.

“I’m sorry,” said Sam finally. “I don’t know why I reacted that way. I don’t know why I cried.”

“Are you homesick?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. He got up from the bunk slowly. “I’m not homesick at all. Funny thing–I really have it good here.”

“But you’re in jail!”

“Oh, that won’t last. They’ll charge me with district trespassing. Then they’ll drive me to the edge of town and release me into the neutral zone. They’ll do the same to you. No big deal. It’s the place where we met.”

“What’s ‘neutral’ mean?”

Sam wrinkled his cheeks as he thought of a way to explain it. “It’s a place that doesn’t belong to anyone. Or to any district. Have you ever played football?”

“All the time.”

“Great,” said Sam. “That was always my favorite sport, but they don’t seem to play it here. They don’t go in for games much at all. Anyway, back to your question. In football, the area between the two teams on the scrimmage line is called the ‘neutral zone,’ right?”

“Sure.”

“That means it doesn’t belong to either team, right?”

“Yup.”

“Well, this is the same thing. Except that it’s between the districts where people live. The neutral zone is pretty burned out. As near as I can figure, there was a war here more than a hundred years ago. The districts were built back up. The neutral zone was left, well, I guess as a reminder.”

Sam climbed up and lay on the top bunk. “Some of the ruins are quite impressive. Anyway, it’s not so bad. Life’s a lot easier here than where we came from, I’ll tell you that.”

“But where we came from was normal!”

The lizard man laughed. ‘‘Does your dad still have a job, kid?’’

‘‘Of course.’’

‘‘Well then, things are probably good for you. Me, I was like a lot of my friends. When the Depression hit, I was out of work.’’

‘‘The Depression?’’

‘‘Sure, you know. The stock market crash? The bankruptcies? Don’t tell me you don’t know what I’m talking about.’’

‘‘Yes, I do,’’ said Michael. ‘‘But the Depression ended a long time ago. Before World War II. Before I was born.’’

‘‘World War II? Two? There was another war?’’ Sam was so surprised he leaned over the bunk and looked down at Michael to make sure he was telling the truth.

‘‘There have been a lot of wars,’’ answered Michael. ‘‘According to what we learned in history class. In the twentieth century, there was World War I. And World War II. Then Korea, and one in Vietnam. And the Gulf War. But that’s over, too.’’

Sam shook his head. ‘‘Geez, more wars. Were they bad?’’

‘‘World War II was really terrible,’’ said Michael, remembering what he had learned in school. ‘‘It took an atom bomb to end it.’’

‘‘An atom bomb?’’ Sam stroked his lizard chin. ‘‘So they did figure it out. What other inventions have I missed?’’

Sam listened in amazement as Michael told him about some of the many things that were now common in their world—televisions, computers, jet planes. All had been perfected after Sam had become a lizard.

‘‘Things have sure changed,’’ said Sam.

‘‘But what happened to us?’’ asked Michael. ‘‘How did we get to look like this?’’

‘‘As near as I can figure it,’’ said Sam, ‘‘we have stumbled into something physicists in my human days called an alternative universe. Do you know what that means?’’

‘‘Alternative means different, doesn’t it?’’

‘‘Yes, exactly,’’ said Sam. ‘‘You see, some of us scientists—’’

‘‘You were a scientist?’’

‘‘Well, I was just a lab assistant. That was before I lost my job in the Depression,’’ explained Sam. ‘‘I worked at a place called Princeton University. Ever hear of it?’’

‘‘Is it in New Jersey?’’ Michael asked. ‘‘I think that’s where my cousin goes to college.’’

‘‘Glad to hear it’s still around,’’ said Sam. He then launched into a long explanation of a science called physics. He talked about Albert Einstein and relativity, which was a pretty new theory when Sam was around. Most of what he said was difficult for Michael to understand. But the outline was simple: the scientists had believed that more than one universe existed. If there were other universes, there should be a point where an intersection could be found. It would be like two streets running together. It might be possible to go from one universe to another.

"Like crossing the street?" asked Michael.

"Well, not exactly," said Sam. "My boss worked on the problem for years. Then came the Depression, and we were all out of work. I took odd jobs to support myself. I even sold apples in New York City for a bit. Finally I heard that my old boss and some friends of his had set up shop in New Mexico. So I said goodbye to my family and I began my days as a hobo."

"Was it exciting?"

"If you call getting chased by dogs and shot at by cops exciting. Oh that reminds me—they consider dogs good food here. Sorry if we grossed you out. It's like eating chicken back where we come from."

"Yuk."

"Chicken is very valuable here. There are hardly any birds at all. A single feather is worth more than a diamond. Rich people put them on their walls to show how much money they have. If they're really, really rich, they wear them as jewelry, the way your mother might wear diamonds or gold. See, this universe is very similar to ours, but it's not exactly the same."

"Why not?"

"It has to do with statistics and probability."

"I don't really understand," confessed Michael.

"Don't worry. I don't, either. But let's say you and I started flipping a coin, and we flipped it all day. Because of the law of averages, heads would probably

come up fifty percent of the time for me, and fifty percent of the time for you."

"That's what my math teacher said. Me and my friend Dave Chafetz tried it."

"Did it work?"

"He got heads forty-seven times out of one hundred, and I got it fifty-one."

"Close enough," said Sam. "But I'll bet that even if you both had the same number, the sequence would have been different."

"Sequence?"

"The order of things," explained Sam. He made it sound like it was a word everyone used all the time. "Maybe you got heads first, then tails and another tails, and then heads. And your pal got tails, then heads and tails and heads."

"You're right! That's what happened!"

"Well, that's exactly the same in this alternative universe. Overall, things are very, very similar. It would be like the total number of coin flips. But there are some small differences along the way. To us, those small differences mean a lot."

"Like the fact that they call the places they live districts instead of towns?"

"Exactly."

"And that we have lizard heads instead of people heads?"

"Now you got it," said Sam. He seemed very pleased that Michael had been able to figure it all out.

"So how did you get here?" Michael asked.

‘‘I’m not sure, exactly.’’ Sam scratched his head. By now Michael was so used to his friend being a lizard that it didn’t seem odd to be talking to him at all. ‘‘I worked my way across the country to New Mexico. Took so long I lost track of time. Finally, though, I made it. I had to walk in the desert a long, long time. I was tired and hungry. I must’ve lost about fifty pounds.’’

Sam patted his round belly. He must have put on a lot of weight since those days.

‘‘Anyway, I stopped in a small town and got directions. They were working in a lab about thirty miles southwest from where I was. I hitched a ride about halfway, then had to walk. The entire area was off-limits. Guards were posted, but I convinced them that my old boss wanted me. I couldn’t get a ride to the lab, though. I had to walk. Finally, it got dark and I grew tired. I knew I was almost there. But I just had to rest. I found a cave off the road and I collapsed inside it. I must have slept at least ten hours. When I woke up—well, here I was.’’

Michael nodded. Sam’s story sounded pretty crazy—but so did his. He told Sam everything that had happened to him.

‘‘That’s odd,’’ said Sam. ‘‘I can understand what happened to me. My scientist friends must have been conducting experiments in the area where I fell asleep. But you just walked into a regular house?’’

Michael shrugged. ‘‘It was new. And it had ‘Do Not Trespass’ signs on it.’’

‘‘That doesn’t seem like enough to me,’’ said Sam. ‘‘Was it in New Mexico?’’

‘‘We live in Florida.’’

‘‘In a scientific area?’’

‘‘No. Just a regular town.’’

Sam was baffled.

‘‘The house where everything happened to me isn’t far from here,’’ said Michael. ‘‘Maybe if we go back to it, we can get back home.’’

‘‘There’s no way back,’’ said Sam. ‘‘Believe me, I’ve tried. We’re stuck here. We’re lizards forever.’’

8

Michael covered his ears as soon as Sam said that. He refused to believe that he couldn't go home. He didn't even want to consider that he might never see his friends and family again.

“We have to escape!” he insisted. “We have to! Isn't there a way to break out of here?”

“Oh, the jail's not the problem,” Sam said. He rubbed his eyes. He was tired. “They'll let us go tomorrow. They'll drive us to the neutral zone and release us. That's the worst thing that can happen to a lizard person. To you and me, it's nothing. Once we're in the neutral zone, we can make our way to the next district, or wherever we want to go.”

“But what if they shoot us!”

“The rays do hurt,” Sam admitted. “You don't want to get hit by one, if you can help it.”

“Have you ever been zapped by one?”

“Twice. They don't do any real harm, but they do sting. And, of course, they freeze you for hours. The real danger is if something comes along and attacks you during that time. There are some roving rhino dogs in the neutral zone. Have you see any?”

“The police had something that looked like a miniature elephant.”

“Oh, that was just a dogphant. They're nothing. The rhino dogs in the neutral zones are vicious. If they come across you when you're frozen, you'll lose a leg or an arm for sure.”

“Great.”

“It'll grow back. That's another good thing about this universe—lizards regenerate. There's an easy way to escape the lizard people, though,” added Sam. His voice had dropped to a whisper. “They can't climb.”

“They can't climb?”

“Not a lick. And because they can't, they think no one can. If you scoot up a tree, they won't see you.”

Michael nodded. Now he knew why the policemen had missed him earlier.

“It's something in their minds,” continued Sam. “They think they can't, so they don't. You could be three inches above them, and they'd never know it.”

Sam threw his shoes to the floor and lay back on the pillow. “Relax. It isn't a bad life. Really.”

“It's horrible!” objected Michael. “They force you to go to concerts and order you to have a good time.”

“Oh that. Well, lizard people have a strange attitude toward fun. They tend not to have any. Most of them aren't even crazy about sports. Their scientists decided years ago that people would be healthier if they had fun, so they passed a law stating that people would go to group activities and other fun events at least once a week. Everyone has to attend.”

“But there were guards with guns!”

“It's the law. Things are different here. You'll get used to it.”

Michael was dumbfounded and confused. He didn't understand how anyone could pass a law that said you had to have fun.

“Why is it against the law to go into a different district?” Michael asked.

“Beats me.” Sam yawned. “They're all very similar. That war had something to do with it. Don't want any troublemakers, I guess.”

Michael could tell Sam was dozing off. “How do they know where you belong?” he asked Sam. “And how did you know I was from the human world?”

Sam didn't answer. He had fallen asleep.

Dejected, Michael lay back on his cot. Even though his legs were tired, it was way too early to fall asleep.

Trapped here forever? No way. If he had gotten here, he could get back. There was always a solution to a problem, no matter how difficult it was to find. He had to hang in there, and keep working on it. He couldn't give up.

But it was tough not to despair. Michael looked at the photo of his family. All of a sudden, tears started

popping into his lizard eyes. Sobbing, he turned over and buried his head in his pillow.

“Michael. Michael Roglitz, wake up. Young'un, wake up.”

Michael rolled over in the bunk. He couldn't remember where he was.

“Come on, wake up.”

Officer Anthony was shaking his leg. Michael struggled to focus his eyes.

“Come on now, let's go.”

Michael sat up slowly. The policeman stepped back. He had a big smile on his lizard face.

“Let's go, Michael,” said Officer Anthony. “Your parents are here.”

9

‘‘M-my parents?’’ stuttered Michael in disbelief.

‘‘Come on, let’s go.’’ Officer Anthony held open the jail cell door as he urged Michael to put on his shoes. Stunned, Michael pulled his laces tight and trotted out into the hallway.

‘‘My parents are here?’’

‘‘They told me the whole story,’’ said the lizard policeman. ‘‘How you tried to run away because you were different than the other kids. Come on now. I have to take care of some paperwork and then we’ll give you a ride home.’’

Michael didn’t know what to expect. Were his human parents really here? What if they had been changed into lizard people, too? Would they know the way back? What if they wanted to stay here, like Sam?

Michael’s pace down the hallway slowed as he

thought about those questions. By the time he reached the door at the end of the hall, he was barely moving.

‘‘Here we go,’’ said the policeman, pulling open the door.

Michael closed his eyes.

‘‘Michael, Michael! Here you are!’’ shouted a voice that sounded a lot like his mom’s.

‘‘It’s good to see you again, son,’’ said a voice like his father’s.

Michael kept his eyes closed tight. He hoped this was all a dream. He hoped that when he opened his eyes, everything would be back to normal.

A pair of arms grabbed him and pulled him close to a perfumed chest. The perfume was more than familiar—it was exactly the kind his mom wore.

He raised his head and opened his eyes.

Then he closed them quick. If they really were his mom and dad, they, too, were lizard people.

Their clothes looked a lot like his parents’ clothes, but a kid can tell who his parents are. These weren’t them.

Michael quickly decided not to let on. He figured that they would get him out of the police station. Then he could escape. It shouldn’t be too hard getting away from the lizard people, now that he knew they couldn’t climb trees. He would go to the building on the cul-de-sac, and somehow get back home.

‘‘I’m Mike Ruglitz, and this is my wife Lilly,’’ the lizard father told the barracks commander. ‘‘Our son ran away a few days ago.’’

The barracks commander nodded and wrote something down on a piece of paper. As Mr. Ruglitz spelled his name, Michael realized that he used a “u” instead of an “o” in his name. Otherwise, the name was exactly the same.

Officer Anthony had gone to the address Michael had given and found these two lizard people there. Since there were so many things that were the same in this universe, Michael wasn’t too surprised that there was a 7 West Bay Street here, too. But he was really curious about the rest. They had nearly the same names—in his universe, Michael’s mom’s name was Millie, not Lilly.

They also had a son the same age as him. So what had happened to him?

Had he gotten lost in Michael’s universe?

“Michael disappeared from home a few days ago,” Mr. Ruglitz told the police. “His mother has been worried sick.”

“You’ve been worried, too,” Mrs. Ruglitz told her husband. She put her arm on Michael’s shoulder. “But Michael’s back with us now.”

“Why did you run away?” the policeman asked Michael.

Michael remembered what Officer Anthony had said inside. “I was tired of being different.”

The policeman nodded. “I can understand that,” he said. “But you have to obey your parents.”

“I will, sir. From now on, I’ll do everything they say.”

The barracks commander looked at him funny. Michael wasn’t sure why. He decided not to say anything else. He still didn’t know that much about this lizard world, and it would be easy to make a mistake. Then they might realize they had the wrong kid. Michael looked down at the ground. He decided he would keep his eyes trained there, as if they were pasted in place.

“I don’t think anyone will mind if we give you back to your parents,” said the barracks commander, finally.

Michael could feel the happy grips of the lizard parents on his back.

“But there’s one question that has to be answered,” said the commander, putting up his hand. “What happened to his ID tag? It’s not on his earlobe. That’s why we arrested him in the first place. No ID.”

Michael froze. So that was how they knew he wasn’t from here. He glanced up at the policeman and saw a piece of metal near his ear. Michael had thought it was just an earring. He realized now that everyone had them.

No one spoke for a minute. I guess it’s back to the jail cell for me, Michael thought to himself.

“He had an accident a few months ago,” said the lizard father. “And his ear only recently grew back. We haven’t had a chance to take him in to the district registry.”

“Come here, son. Let me see that ear,” said Officer Anthony.

Michael took a step forward. The policeman took his head gently and turned it, then touched his right ear.

The same ear he had hurt playing football.

"Ouch!" said Michael with a start, even though it didn't hurt all that much.

"Yes, I see. I can see the bruise," said the lizard cop. "But the law says, the tag must be reapplied when the ear regenerates."

"If it's still bruised, it's not completely regenerated," said Mr. Ruglitz.

The barracks commander nodded. "OK. Well, let's take a photo for our records, then you're free to go. He's a good boy," the commander added. "But see that he obeys you from now on."

"We won't let him out of our sight," said Mrs. Ruglitz.

Michael sat quietly in the back of the car as they drove to their house. He felt a twinge of sadness at leaving Sam, but he knew this was his only chance to escape from the lizard world. He didn't dare ask why these people thought he was their son. He was too afraid they might send him back to the jail. It was already dark. All he had to do was wait until everyone was asleep, then he could easily sneak back to the house on the cul-de-sac.

Lizard cars were a lot like cars in his world. In fact, they were almost identical. The back seat was black crushed velvet. It made a scrunchy sound as Michael sat on it. The steering wheel and the dashboard seemed exactly the same as in his world. The radio buttons were triangles instead of squares or circles. The seats were a little more rounded. Otherwise, this car would fit right in at home.

"Your sister will be happy to see you," said the lizard mother.

Michael wondered if her name would be Julie, just like it was in his world. He thought it best not to ask, though—he didn't want to do anything to tip them off that he wasn't their son.

As they pulled onto West Bay Street, Michael began to think about the lizard boy who was really their son. Had he been sent to Michael's world? He wondered if his parents would mistake him for the "real" Michael. Impossible, he told himself. But he had to admit—these lizard people did seem to think he was their Michael. They led him up the driveway and into the house without saying anything. Inside, his lizard mom asked if he'd like something to eat.

"You must be starving," she said. "Come, I'll whip up a pizza."

"Pizza!" said Michael, forgetting for a second where he was. Truly, he was starved worse than a pig on a diet. "Pizza's my favorite."

"You didn't think I'd forget, did you? It's been your favorite since you cracked open the shell of your egg on the day you were born."

While Michael thought about that, his lizard sister entered the kitchen. Her name was Jamie, not Julie. But otherwise, she was just like his sister at home—two years younger, and a super pain.

Not to mention a lizard.

"Does this mean I can't have his room?" was the first thing she said.

“Go wash up before you eat,” said his lizard father.

“I already have,” she insisted. Her voice had the same know-it-all whine Julie’s did.

“I was speaking to your brother.”

Michael walked down the hallway and found the bathroom. There were a lot of differences between this house and his house in the human world. For one thing, it was all on one level; his real home had three sets of stairs. For another, it looked practically brand new; his house at home was very old. And the furniture here was made entirely out of metal.

Michael shut the door to the bathroom behind him. He looked at his face in the mirror for the longest time. No doubt about it—he was a lizard boy. The green and brown scales were exactly like the scales on everyone else’s face. He opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue. The long, red fork flicked in the air. He couldn’t quite control it yet. It snapped right against the mirror.

“Ouch!” he said out loud.

“Michael, are you all right?” yelled Mrs. Ruglitz.

“I’m fine.” Michael listened at the door to see if they were coming for him. When he didn’t hear anything, he sat down on the floor. He needed a little time to think.

What if what old Sam had said were true? What if he couldn’t get back home?

Michael stood up and looked at himself in the mirror again. When he had first caught sight of himself, he’d been grossed out. Now it didn’t look so bad. He was getting used to being a lizard.

Michael reached into his pocket for the snapshot of

his folks. The pocket was empty. With a start, he realized that he had left the picture back in the bunk.

Michael rested his lizard head on his hands, just like he would have as a human. He took a long breath through his nose. It felt very normal.

Without the photo, Michael worried that he might forget what he was supposed to look like.

If he couldn’t go back to his world, living here with a family would be a lot better than living in the neutral zone. The warehouses were ugly. They were probably cold during the winter as well. And Sam had already warned him about the rhino dogs.

He could stay here and pretend to be a lizard boy. It seemed pretty easy to fool these lizard folks.

No, Michael thought. I have to find my way back home. Mom and Dad are going to be plenty worried. And even if Julie is a pain, she’s still my real sister. As nice as these people may be, I can’t stay here.

His decision was made. Michael would pretend to be their son until everyone went to bed. Then he would sneak out and go back to the house on the cul-de-sac. It should be only a short distance away.

From what Sam had told him, he knew it must be a link with his universe. If it worked in one direction, it was bound to work in the other.

It had to.

For now, though, he had to pretend he belonged here. He couldn’t do anything suspicious.

Michael joined the family in the kitchen. While they were waiting for the pizza to cook, Jamie stuck her tongue out at him. This was almost an exact replay of what his real sister would do. Except that Jamie’s tongue was about fifteen inches long.

Even though he was tempted to stick his own tongue out, he didn’t. He was afraid it might get tangled. The less he did to attract attention, the less chance they would find out he was an impostor.

‘‘Pizza’s ready!’’ said Mrs. Ruglitz, turning with the pizza to the table.

Michael nearly passed out. The pie was covered with the hairiest spiders he’d ever seen. A huge tarantula, its legs squirming, pointed its teeth at him and hissed.

10

‘‘What’s wrong, Michael?’’ asked Mr. Ruglitz. ‘‘Not hungry?’’

‘‘It’s your favorite,’’ said Mrs. Ruglitz, pushing the entire pizza—and its spiders—under his chin. ‘‘Fresh tarantulas. I stunned them myself.’’

‘‘Still wiggling,’’ said Mr. Ruglitz, taking a piece. ‘‘Yum.’’

‘‘Oh, the best,’’ said Jamie. She plucked one of the spiders right off the pizza and swallowed it whole.

‘‘I—I don’t feel that good,’’ said Michael, pushing his chair away from the table.

‘‘Can I have Michael’s spider?’’ Jamie asked.

‘‘No. I’ll save it for him,’’ said her mother. She reached out and put her hand to his forehead. ‘‘You feel rather cold, Michael. Are you coming down with something?’’

"He just wants to stay home from school tomorrow," said Jamie. She gobbled down her pizza gleefully.

"I—I think I'll go lie down," Michael said. "I'm a little tired."

"Yes, I think that's a good idea," said Mr. Ruglitz.

"Can I have his dessert?" Jamie asked. "I love caramel ants."

"No, I'm saving them for Michael," said Mrs. Ruglitz.

"She can have them!" shouted Michael, running from the room.

Michael stopped running as soon as he entered the hallway. He wasn't sure which room was supposed to be his.

The first room he came to had a large bed. There were also two large chests of drawers. He knew this must be the parents' room.

There were two doors further down the hallway. Both had "Keep Out!" signs. The only difference between the signs was their color. One was green. The other was brown.

Michael knew one of the rooms must belong to Jamie, and the other to her real brother. Which was which?

I like brown more than green, Michael reasoned. So maybe the lizard Michael does, too.

As soon as he opened the door, though, he could tell he had made a mistake. The bedspread was pink, and there were toys that looked like Barbie dolls on the floor.

Barbie dolls with lizard heads, of course.

"What are you doing in my room!" squealed Jamie from behind him.

"Nothing," said Michael, closing the door quickly.

He opened the other one and went inside. The wall was blank except for a single, tattered sports poster. Its edges were tattered and it looked very crinkled, as if it had been folded and refolded many times.

In the picture, a large lizard man slammed a square through a rectangular hole. "Michael Jordun scores!" said the words below it.

Michael stared at the poster. He knew it must be the lizard version of basketball. It sure looked weird, though. Not only was the ball a square, but the basket was on the ground. And the defenders wore kneepads.

Michael shook his head in wonder. He had a poster of his world's Michael Jordan—spelled with an "a," not a "u"—on his own wall at home.

In his world, Michael kept extra candy bars in the bottom desk drawer. Curious, he went to the drawer and opened it. Sure enough, there was a candy bar there.

He hadn't eaten since lunch, so he pulled off the wrapper and examined the bar. When he didn't see any insects, he took a bite. The chocolate was good and sweet, though a little hard to chew.

"Oww!" he said as he bit into something hard. He took the candy bar out of his mouth—and saw a tooth had come out with it! Michael cleaned it off and examined it. It was about the same size as a human baby tooth, without a real root.

Michael stuck his finger in his mouth. It wasn't hard to find the empty spot. Already, there was a new tooth poking up through the gum. He stuck the old tooth in his pocket. Even if they believed in the tooth fairy here, he didn’t plan on being around long enough to find anything under his pillow.

“What do you have in your hand?” asked Jamie. She had snuck in the room behind him.

“Nothing.” Michael hid the candy bar behind his back. It was exactly what he would have done in his real home.

“I want a candy bar, too.”

“I don’t have any left,” he said.

“Gimme!”

Jamie lunged for the candy bar. Michael popped the chocolate into his mouth.

“I’m telling.”

“You want my tooth? It just fell out.”

“I have plenty of my own,” she said, crossing her arms. “I’m staying here until you give me a candy bar,” said Jamie. She plopped herself down on the bed.

Michael looked around the room, as if he were trying to ignore her. The room was a lot cleaner than his at home. There was no mess or piles of junk anywhere. A pair of in-line skates stood in the corner. On the desk, books were placed in three short stacks. And next to them was a small terrarium—a dry tank that would be used to hold lizards in Michael’s world.

Except that there weren’t lizards in this tank. There were miniature people.

Michael screamed in fright. Mr. and Mrs. Ruglitz came running in.

“Are you all right?” Mrs. Ruglitz asked.

“What’s wrong?” asked his lizard father.

Michael couldn’t speak. The two creatures peered at him from behind the glass of their tank. He saw now that they weren’t people, exactly. They had human-like heads. But their bodies were covered with hair, like a gorilla’s would be. Still, they reminded him of his friends back home.

Mr. Ruglitz followed Michael’s gaze to the tank. “Oh, yes. I’m very sorry. Little Davey died while you were away,” he said. “We flushed him down the toilet.” He went over and picked up one of the miniature people. He poked it in the belly. “Cute little things. Too bad their brains are so tiny.”

“Put it down!” screamed Michael.

“Don’t yell at me,” said Mr. Ruglitz angrily. He put the creature back into the tank. “Watch your mouth, young man.”

“I’m sorry,” said Michael.

“Come on, dear,” said Mrs. Ruglitz to her husband. “Let’s let Michael get some rest. He’s had a very trying day.”

I’ll say, Michael thought to himself as all three left. He closed the door behind them. Then he went to the tank.

“Are you guys all right?” he asked them. “Pete? Tommy? Is that you? Are you guys just pets in this world? You’re not really people?”

The two small creatures looked up at him. They seemed to understand what he was saying. He leaned closer for another look. Were these his friends? Had they somehow been changed into these tiny beings?

The two creatures ran behind a rock in the middle of the terrarium. They peered out from behind it, shaking.

I'll never stay in this universe now, Michael thought to himself. I have to go home.

“Can you guys understand what I'm saying?” he asked the creatures as he looked down at them. “I'm not really a lizard. I'm a human being. Do you understand me?”

He studied them. Their faces didn't look like his friends' after all. In fact, he could tell by the way they moved that they were a lot different than human beings. Probably they weren't anywhere near as intelligent. They were more like—well, like lizards were in his world.

Still, it was horrible to think that they were kept as pets. The idea made him shake.

“I'll set you free if you want,” he told them. “Tell me where to take you and I will. I'm not a lizard person, I swear. I'm a human being. Same as you.”

If the creatures understood him, they didn't let on. Both cowered behind the rocks.

“These people think I'm their son, but I'm not,” Michael told the pets. “I'm not a lizard at all. I'm a human being! From a different universe.”

Just then, Michael heard a noise at the door. He turned and saw Jamie standing there. Her mouth was wide open.

Michael started to tell her that he was just fooling around, but it was too late.

“Mommy! Daddy! That's not my real brother! He's some sort of alien! Call the police!”

11

Michael ran after her. He saw there was no hope of getting her to keep quiet once he entered the hall, however. Mr. Ruglitz was standing with his hands on his hips. He snorted and snarled. Michael nearly fell backwards.

“Jamie, go to your room!” Mr. Ruglitz ordered.

“But—”

“Now!” The lizard father's angry voice was not to be disobeyed. The girl turned and slunk into her bedroom.

“Come with me, son,” said Mr. Ruglitz, holding out his hand. His voice was firm, but gentle. He sounded a lot like Michael's real father. “It's all right. We knew as soon as we saw you that you weren't our son.”

“How did you know?” Michael asked.

“A parent can always tell,” said Mr. Ruglitz.

“Please don't take it personally,” he added. “You look a lot like him, but you’re not quite as handsome. A lot of little things tipped us off. We’re not going to hurt you. I promise.’’

Michael didn’t see any choice other than to follow along. They walked slowly out to the kitchen.

Mrs. Ruglitz was waiting. She had a long knife in her hand. She turned and took a step toward Michael, her long tongue snapping in the air.

Michael tried to scream, but nothing came out.

The mother lizard lifted the knife into the air. Then she slapped the sharp edge on a piece of meat sitting on the table beside him.

‘‘Exactly in half,’’ she said. ‘‘Here—have some of this cow heart. It will make you feel better.’’

Michael shook his head. He watched as she put the knife into the sink and slid the heart onto a plate for her husband.

‘‘It’s quite a treat in our district,’’ said the woman. ‘‘Do you have it where you come from?’’

‘‘No,’’ said Michael.

‘‘Sit down, please,’’ said Mrs. Ruglitz. ‘‘You look a lot like our Michael. When the policeman came to the house, at first we thought it was a miracle.’’

Her voice started to tremble. She sat down next to him. Mr. Ruglitz sat down, too.

‘‘Michael wasn’t like the other boys. He always wanted to have fun. He was as interested in sports as he was in school,’’ she said.

Mr. Ruglitz reached into his pocket for a tissue. He gave it to her as she began to sob gently.

‘‘You saw the poster in his room,’’ said Mr. Ruglitz. ‘‘Michael got it from somewhere, we don’t know where. This basketball is a sport in a district far away. Maybe you’ve heard of it?’’

‘‘I have heard of basketball,’’ said Michael. He wasn’t sure what to tell them. He still hoped to escape. But he felt bad about their son.

Michael doubted they would believe what old Sam had told him about the alternative universe. He wasn’t even one-hundred-percent sure he believed it himself.

‘‘I should have made Michael take the poster down,’’ said Mrs. Ruglitz. ‘‘I should have insisted that he be like all the other boys, who have to be forced to have fun. I should have made him be the same, not different.’’

‘‘You couldn’t change him,’’ Mr. Ruglitz told her.

‘‘Maybe he’ll come back,’’ Michael suggested. He was trying to be optimistic.

‘‘Anyone who is proven to have left the district faces displacement,’’ Mr. Ruglitz answered. His face was very grave. ‘‘Even if they’re kids. They must stay in the neutral zone, or find a district that will accept them. The rules are very strict here.’’

‘‘That’s why, even though we had searched the entire zone, we hoped you might be him,’’ explained Mrs. Ruglitz. She stopped crying and dried her eyes.

‘‘We decided that, no matter who you were, we would help you,’’ said Mr. Ruglitz. ‘‘We’ll treat you exactly as our son.’’

‘‘Where do you come from?’’ asked Mrs. Ruglitz.

Michael wasn't sure what to tell them. "From far away," he said at last.

"You poor dear. Did you run away?"

"No. I kind of got lost." Michael sensed that these people were very nice and wouldn't hurt him. He decided to tell them as much of the truth as he thought they would believe. Sooner or later, they would get tired and go to bed. Then he could go ahead with his plan to escape.

"This afternoon, I—well, I was playing football."

"Football?" asked the father.

"It's kind of a game," he said. "I guess I'm like your son; I like to have fun. Everybody does, where I come from. Anyway, I went after the ball, and the next thing I knew, I was lost."

"Your parents must be very worried," said the lizard mother. Her voice sounded like a sob. Michael could see tears forming in her eyes again.

Without warning, he felt one forming in his eye, too. And then another and another. He couldn't stop himself from crying. He was suddenly very sad, as sad as he had ever been in his life.

"It's OK, son, you're with us now," said the lizard father, patting his back. "You're home."

"B-but I'm not your real son."

"We have to face the facts. We may never see our son again."

"I'm sure he'll come back," Michael told them, mopping up his tears. "I'm sure he will."

"You can stay with us, even if he does," insisted

Mrs. Ruglitz between sobs. "We'll love you like our own child."

"I always wanted another son," said the father. "Especially one as obedient and nice as you."

Great, Michael thought to himself. I'm a model lizard kid. I wonder what they'll say in the morning, when they discover that I'm gone.

Still, it felt pretty good to be wanted, even if he didn't plan on staying. Michael began to cheer up a little. He even volunteered to help clean up the kitchen. That was something he would rarely do at home.

He had just finished loading the dishwasher when the doorbell rang.

"I wonder who that could be at this hour," said Mrs. Ruglitz.

Michael followed her to the door. He truly hoped it was their real son. Not only did he want them to be happy, but he was also curious. He wanted to hear what it was like to be a kid here.

But when the lizard mother pulled open the door, her son wasn't standing there.

The barracks commander from the police station and two other policemen were.

"There he is," said the commander.

Before Michael could even flinch, the policemen grabbed him.

"You are under arrest for district trespass," said the commander. "As well as for impersonating a lawful citizen. Put him in chains!"

12

The lizard mother started crying. Jamie came running from her room, and begged for the police to leave her brother alone.

‘‘I swear he’s my son,’’ said Mr. Ruglitz.

‘‘Be careful what you say, sir,’’ the barracks commander warned. ‘‘We already have our evidence.’’

‘‘There must be a mistake,’’ insisted Mr. Ruglitz. Silently, Michael thanked the lizard father for fighting so hard for him.

‘‘It’s obvious that he doesn’t belong here,’’ said the commander. ‘‘Look at his eyes.’’

The lizard father looked at him. Michael saw a pained expression come over his face. His chest sagged, as if he were a balloon and someone let the air out of him.

‘‘I didn’t notice it until we developed the photo at the police station,’’ said the commander. ‘‘I blame myself. He even spells his name differently than you, with an ‘o’ where the ‘u’ should be. At first I thought it was just sloppy handwriting, but then I saw the photo.’’ The barracks commander shook his head. ‘‘Take him,’’ he told his men.

‘‘Wait, wait!’’ protested Michael. ‘‘What’s wrong with my eyes?’’

‘‘They’re blue,’’ said the commander. ‘‘No one in this district has blue eyes. I’ve never even heard of such a thing. Blue eyes instead of red!’’

As Michael was hustled outside, he realized how Sam had known where he had come from. Sam’s eyes, Michael remembered, were as blue as his.

A police van was waiting at the curb. It was a much bigger vehicle than the one he’d been in before. It was like a monster truck, with huge wheels and metal spikes around the outside of the cab. An army of floodlights stood on the hood and roof of the truck. Suddenly, they flipped on. The whole block looked like a baseball stadium during the World Series.

Two lizard cops reached down and pulled him inside. He didn’t resist. How could he? His hands and feet were chained together. The chains were loose enough so he could walk, but he’d never be able to run in them.

The door was shut behind him. Sirens wailed and the radio crackled. Michael watched out the back window as other police cars drove up. A pair of motorcycles zipped by. The van led the procession back to the police station.

But as Michael was marched down the hallway to the jail cell, he began to cheer up. He knew Sam would help him. He really liked the old lizard man. It would be good to see his friend again.

Except for one thing—the cell was empty.

‘‘What happened to Sam?’’ he said, as the door clanged shut behind him.

‘‘That old geezer? Judge released him hours ago.’’

‘‘Wait! Wait!’’ yelled Michael. He spun back and slammed his chained fists on the door. The metal cuffs dug into his wrists, and he screamed in pain.

‘‘Don’t hurt yourself,’’ one of the policemen called. ‘‘Judge won’t like that.’’

‘‘But I don’t belong here! I don’t even belong in this universe!’’

The guards closed the door at the far end of the hallway, leaving Michael alone with his sadness and fear.

When he glanced down at the bunk, he remembered the photo he had left behind. Maybe if he could show it to the judge, the judge would help him get back to his real home. Michael dove to the bed. He rummaged through the sheets, searching for the picture. But it was nowhere to be found.

Now what will I do? he wondered. No one will believe me if I tell them what really happened. And if I don’t, they’ll dump me into the neutral zone. I won’t even have Sam around to help me. I’m bound to be attacked by one of those stupid rhino dog things.

Michael slumped on his cot. He didn’t even get up when an officer brought him a bag of food that he said was from McDonuld’s. At first, Michael left it on the floor, but the smell reminded him how hungry he was. He went to the bag and saw there was a hamburger, fries and a soda inside.

And no spiders.

He took a bite from the burger. It tasted exactly like the ones he was used to. Then he grabbed the fries. They did, too. The soda was a bit odd—it was a purple color. But it tasted a lot like root beer, so he drank it anyway.

The food filled him up, but he was still feeling sad. He tried to think of a plan, but couldn’t come up with one. Then he decided to cheer himself up with a pep talk. He couldn’t come up with one of those, either. Everything seemed hopeless. He knew there must be some way out of this mess, but it was pretty hard to think of what it might be. It was pretty hard to think of anything, in fact. It was hard to do anything but to feel very, very sad.

‘‘Sorry to see you back here, young’un,’’ said a familiar voice from the door.

Michael jumped to his feet. It was the nice policeman, Officer Bob Anthony. He put his key in the lock and opened the door.

‘‘Are you letting me go?’’ Michael asked.

‘‘Sorry, son. I have to take you to the judge. Come along now.’’

Michael followed the policeman down several halls and an elevator. Only a few hours ago, he would have been shocked by the faces of the lizard guards he passed. Now he was pretty used to them. He noticed again how each face was a little different. Some had cheeks that were a little puffed out. Some had very wrinkled foreheads. The scales on their faces were always different shades of green or brown. Some had slightly pointy shapes. Others were very round. But every eye he saw was red.

“Hear ye, hear ye, court is now in session!” said the bailiff as they entered the courtroom.

The bailiff was the officer in charge of the court. He had a long staff in his hand. It looked a little like a shepherd's staff. Michael was led to the front of the room. A large platform stood there. A seat with plush red fabric like a throne sat on the platform. Officer Anthony led him directly in front of it.

The Ruglitz family sat in the audience. There were several police officers there as well, including the barracks commander.

“All rise!” said the bailiff. He knocked the end of his staff on the floor. A door near the front of the room opened and the judge entered. He wore a long black robe. He had gray hair and very long jowls on both sides of his lizard chin. He flicked his tongue when he sat down. Thick and gray, it was forked in three parts instead of two.

“The case of the People versus Michael Roglitz, an unlawful intruder, will now be heard,” said the bailiff. Michael nodded when the judge asked him if he was

Michael Roglitz. The bailiff quickly read the two charges:

(1) Michael Roglitz has trespassed in this district.
(2) Michael Roglitz has pretended to be a legally registered district resident.

The judge asked who would speak first. Mrs. Ruglitz jumped to her feet.

“Please, your honor, let him stay with us. We want to adopt him. We'll raise him as our own son. He's such a nice boy.”

“I'm sorry,” the judge told her. “But that's against the law. If he is found guilty, he will be banished to the neutral zone. We cannot give preferential treatment. Once an exception is made, there will be others.”

Mrs. Ruglitz started crying as she sank back in her chair.

The lizard policeman who had first arrested Michael told the judge what had happened. “I was just doing my duty, your honor,” said the officer. “I should note that young Michael was a model prisoner.”

The judge nodded.

Then Officer Bob Anthony spoke. He said that Michael was a good kid. Michael nearly fainted when the barracks commander stood up and echoed his remarks.

“I like the boy myself, your honor,” said the barracks commander.

The judge scratched one of his jowls. His tongue whipped through the air in Michael's direction. A strange expression came over the judge's face.

"I'm sorry, too," said the judge finally. "But the law is the law. Do you have anything to say for yourself, young man?"

"It's true that I don't belong here," Michael answered. "Your honor, please help me to go home. I come from an alternative universe. See, I accidentally went into this house on Garden Street. If I could just get back—"

The judge suddenly became very angry. His forehead swelled and his tongue flapped out in the air as if it were an attack dog. For a second, Michael feared he was going to be vaporized on the spot.

"Silence!" thundered the judge. "You are not allowed to speak!"

"B-but you just told me—"

"Michael Roglitz, I sentence you to permanent banishment," declared the judge. "Bailiff, call in the special forces."

Everyone in the courtroom seemed surprised by the judge's harsh reaction.

"We don't need the special forces here, your honor," said the barracks commander. "And this is only a kid, a child—"

"Silence in my court!" thundered the judge. "Any more outbursts and you will be permanently banished with him!"

Two guards in silvery uniforms entered from the back door. They were wearing combat gear, with helmets and thick vests. The guards grabbed Michael by the arms and lifted him into the air. Before he even knew what was happening, they carried him from the courtroom.

"It's OK, it's OK," he tried to tell them. "I'm not going to run away. I'm still chained. You can put me down."

The guards didn't pay any attention. They carried Michael down the hallway to a back door. A van was waiting there.

"Are you driving me to the neutral zone?" Michael asked, as the guards opened the back door.

The guard holding him laughed.

"Neutral zone? You were sentenced to permanent banishment," said the guard, pushing him into the vehicle.

"What's that mean?"

"Death," said the guard, slamming the door.

13

Michael's screams were drowned out by the roar of the engine. The wheels of the van screeched as it thundered away from the building. Michael flew to one side as it careened from the parking lot onto the road. The lizard driver had stomped the gas pedal to the floor. The van whipped onto the highway like a race car.

Michael glanced out the window. Lights dashed past in a frenzy. The driver sure was in a hurry to take him to death row.

The tires squealed as the driver made a sharp turn to the right. Everything inside the van, including Michael, tumbled against the side.

''Are you trying to kill me?'' Michael yelped.

''I'm trying to save you,'' said the driver.

''Hey, I know that voice,'' said Michael, climbing to his feet and peering over the front seat. ''Sam!''

''Sam the man, driving the getaway van,'' smiled Sam. ''Get your seatbelt on!''

''B-but—''

Michael didn't have time to finish the sentence as Sam hit the brakes to avoid smashing into a truck. Michael flew into the front seat. Sam threw the gears into reverse and whipped down a side street.

Cars dodged and honked as the van sped away.

''The keys to your chains are on the floor,'' Sam told Michael as he drove. ''Free yourself, then hang on tight!'' He chuckled. ''You should have seen how surprised the real driver was when I knocked him out.''

Two large vehicles festooned with brilliant red lights careened onto the road behind them. They looked a lot like tanks. A large freeze ray was mounted on top of each one. There were also loudspeakers. ''Halt or we'll shoot!'' boomed a voice from the speakers.

''In a pig's eye,'' said Sam. He yanked the steering wheel to the right. The van whipped back onto the highway, heading right for a shopping mall.

One of the tanks fired its ray. It missed their van, but hit a passing car. The car instantly froze solid.

''These guys mean business,'' said Sam, glancing behind him.

''Watch out for that telephone pole!'' Michael screamed. He covered his face as the van headed straight for it.

Sam managed to turn away at the last second. One of the tanks crashed into it. The pole went down with a crash. The tank barely slowed.

Sam skidded into the mall parking lot as the other tank fired. As Sam dodged the ray, he lost control of the wheel. The van jumped up onto the curb and crashed straight through the glass wall of the mall. Lizard people ducked for cover as Sam began driving wildly inside the mall.

‘‘Now this is what I call a shopping spree!’’ Sam yelled. Benches and displays were flying everywhere. Lizard mannequins flew through the air as Sam sideswiped a storefront. Swerving to avoid a fresh shot from the freeze ray, Sam lost a hubcap off the van. It flew through the air and crashed into a large-screen TV that had been set up in front of a department store named Seers.

Michael closed his eyes as Sam continued to drive through the mall. When he opened them, he saw that they were approaching a narrow hallway.

‘‘Sam, we’ll never fit!’’ Michael shouted.

Sam had no intention of driving through. He mashed on the brakes, yanked the wheel and then hit the gas. The van skidded to the side. It drove right toward a store called Radio Snack.

The tank couldn’t stop in time. It crashed into the sides of the hallway with a thunderous roar.

Radio Snack sold electronic gadgets and pies. It was a lot like Radio Shack in the human world, except that you could get a pumpkin pie to go with your stereo.

‘‘Hungry?’’ joked Sam as the van skidded through the large store.

Michael wasn’t exactly in a joking mood. ‘‘Stop!’’ he yelped. ‘‘We’re going to run into the back wall.’’

‘‘Relax. These mall walls are made out of tin. They’re as thin as paper,’’ Sam said. ‘‘It’s the ravine on the other side I’m worried about. If we can get past that, we can reach the neutral zone.’’

‘‘Ravine?’’

The word was drowned out by the crashing screech of the van’s hood bursting through the wall. Sam was right about one thing—the wall was thinner than a piece of tissue paper.

He was right about another thing, too. There was a ravine or deep ditch on the other side of the wall.

The van flew through the air. For a second the headlights flickered into dark nothingness. Then the van hurtled toward the ground faster than a speeding bullet. Michael felt his stomach splurt into his mouth. The van landed on one wheel and tumbled over like a sideways tornado. Even though Michael and Sam were wearing seatbelts and the van had airbags, they bounced around in their seats like a couple of rag dolls.

The van didn’t stop rolling until it smacked into the side of the chainlink fence that marked the beginning of the neutral zone. Michael was dizzy and had trouble seeing straight. It took all his energy to look over at Sam. The old geezer smiled at him one last time, then closed his eyes.

‘‘Don’t die, Sam,’’ said Michael. Then he blanked out.

* * *

When Michael woke up, he was lying on a hospital bed. At first he thought he might have died and gone to heaven. But his head hurt from the crash, so he knew he must still be alive.

Next he thought that maybe he had dreamed everything, including the lizard universe.

No such luck—he looked up and saw a lizard man leaning over him.

It was the judge! But instead of wearing a black robe, he was wearing a white lab coat. The same kind of coat a scientist wears when he's conducting an experiment.

“You've caused us a great deal of trouble, Blue Eyes,” the judge sneered. “You should have stayed in your own universe. Couldn't you read the signs around the house? What do the words ‘Do Not Trespass’ mean to you?”

Michael didn't have an answer for that.

“In our world, that would be enough. But no. You humans are too stubborn. You've made things very difficult for us,” continued the judge. “You could have gone quietly, but no. You had to try and escape. You crashed through the mall and created a big stir. There is bound to be an investigation. Word will get out about our link to your universe. The operation must be shut down.”

“B-b-but you wanted to kill me.”

“We wouldn't have killed you,” said the judge. “We were only going to send you back to your own world. Our universe transition machine would have returned

you to normal. Now, though—now we will have some revenge. What happened to your friend?”

“Sam is still alive?”

“He won't be for long,” vowed the judge. “Our men are out looking for him right now. I don't keep a troop of special forces soldiers around for nothing.”

At least Sam had gotten away, Michael thought.

“Why did you come into our universe?” the judge demanded. “What did you hope to steal?”

“Nothing. I just, well, see, I was chasing a football, and there was a double-dog dare, and then I went into the house.”

“Ha!” laughed the judge. “You expect me to believe you came here for a football? We have used the link to become millionaires!” The judge seemed proud of himself. “Look at our walls. Aren't these the most perfect feathers you've ever seen?”

Michael craned his neck up to see. The room itself looked like a normal hospital room. Except for the bird feathers covering the walls.

“They look like ordinary seagull feathers to me,” said Michael.

“In your world, maybe. In my world, they are worth a fortune. Look at this bracelet. There is none like it in the entire district.”

Michael looked at the bracelet. It seemed to have been made from some crow feathers.

“In your universe,” said the judge, “this would be worthless. In mine, it is more valuable than ten diamonds. You know what a diamond is, don't you?”

“Of course.”

“We have been working on this project for many years,” continued the judge. “And now you have messed up all of our hard work. Do you know how difficult it was to find a place where we could build the link with your universe? Do you know how hard it was to disguise it as a house?”

“It looked like just a dumb old house to me,” said Michael. “And you got the windows wrong. They should have been rectangles.”

“I don't have time for you,” snorted the judge. “My troops will deal with you shortly.”

As soon as the judge had left, Michael dashed to the door. It was locked, of course.

As he turned to look around the room, he heard a strange tapping from the ventilating unit. He looked up just in time to see it pop open.

“Sam the man with an escape plan!” said the blue-eyed lizard who greeted him. “If he can't free you, no one can!”

“Sam! You're here!”

“Who'd you expect? Babe Ruth? Come on, we have to get out of here before they start the roast in your honor.” Sam pointed to a chair in the corner. “Pull the chair over and boost yourself up. There's no time to lose.”

When Michael reached into the steel enclosure, Sam pulled his arms inside. The duct was about four feet across, with flat sides. It was pretty easy to crawl through. Michael followed Sam as he led him into another part of the complex.

“Where are we going?” Michael whispered.

“Sshh!!” Sam hissed. He stopped short in front of a vent opening. Michael didn't breathe again until Sam pushed it open and slid through with a groan.

“Careful on the way down, young'un,” said Sam. He took out a flashlight and shone it around the room. “I'll tell you—my old bones aren't what they used to be.”

“Where are we, Sam?”

“We're in a laboratory not far from the neutral zone. It belongs to the lizard scientists who built the link between the two universes,” said Sam. “They must have done the same thing my old boss tried to do. Except that somehow, they realized they could use it to get rich. I listened to them talk as I snuck through the building. These are evil, greedy scientists, not like the ones I worked for. The judge is their leader.”

Sam went quickly to the door. He listened carefully in case anyone was right outside it. When he was sure there was no one there, he pushed the door open a crack—then closed it just as fast.

“Guard coming this way,” he whispered. He pressed himself against the wall as the doorknob rattled. He turned off his flashlight. Then he raised it up, so he could hit the guard if he had to.

Michael dove to the floor. He watched the door open slowly. All Michael could see was the guard's tongue as it flicked inside, searching for some sign of trouble.

The guard took a step inside—and Sam whacked him on the head with the flashlight.

Michael leapt to his feet and ran to Sam as he took the stun ray from the guard and pulled the man inside the room. He was wearing a shiny, silver uniform just like the special forces guards who had chased Sam and Michael in the van.

"All of their guards wear these uniforms," Sam said. "It keeps them from being harmed by the stun rays."

"Maybe you should put it on," suggested Michael.

"It'll never fit," said Sam. "Besides, we don't have time to change our thoughts, let alone our clothes. Let's go!"

They ran out into the hall. A sign marked "Exit" hung over a door at the far end.

"This leads to a path in the woods. It will take us to the house on the cul-de-sac where your adventure began," Sam told him. "Hurry. They're bound to discover you're missing."

"I'm running as fast as I can," said Michael, struggling to keep up. He remembered everything his gym teacher had told him about running. Stretch your legs. Breathe easily. Michael closed his eyes as he concentrated. When he opened them, he was a full stride ahead of Sam.

The exit door was just ahead. The door had a long, horizontal metal bar across it. The bar was used to open it, just like in schools and other buildings. Michael put his hands out and slammed the door open.

An alarm began to sound.

"Hurry, Sam!" Michael said as he glanced back. He turned and started running again—and crashed right into a lizard policeman with a stun gun.

14

"It's about time you two showed up," said the policeman. "Hurry!"

Michael gave a happy shout when he saw that the lizard policeman was Officer Bob Anthony.

"Are you helping me to escape?" he asked.

"Well, I'm not here for an inspection visit," said the policeman. "Where's Sam?"

"Here I am," said Sam, bursting through the door. "But the scientists and their henchmen are right behind me."

"This way," said the policeman. "My barracks commander has gone for reinforcements at headquarters. He should be here any minute."

The policeman pointed Sam and Michael up a hill. At the top of the hill was Mr. Ruglitz.

"Hurry," he said, helping Michael to the top. "The special forces troops are already on their way."

Michael was amazed at all the help he was getting, but there was no time to thank everyone. He ran with Mr. Ruglitz and the others through the woods.

"The judge told me that they're going to have to shut down the link to my universe," Michael said as he ran.

"We'll arrest them anyway," said the lizard policeman. "The commander knew something was wrong when the judge sentenced you to death. That's against our law."

"That's good," said Michael.

"I need to catch my breath," said Sam, as they reached the end of the trail near the cul-de-sac. "I'm afraid these old legs aren't as spry as they used to be."

"No time to rest now," said Mr. Ruglitz, pointing down the street ahead. Two pickup trucks filled with special forces soldiers were just turning the corner. The guards were wearing silver uniforms like the ones back at the lab.

"You two go ahead," the policeman told Sam and Michael. "We'll hold them back."

"But—"

"No time to argue, son," said Mr. Ruglitz. He bent down and gave Michael a lizard kiss on the forehead. His tongue snapped as he did it.

"Thank you for helping me," said Michael. "But why did you do it?"

"Because you remind me of my son," he said. "And because maybe in your world, someone's helping him."

"I don't think he's in my world," said Michael.

"If he is, help him come back to us," said Mr. Ruglitz. "Now get going."

The pickups were on their way. Michael bolted toward the house. From the corner of his eye, Michael saw Officer Anthony stop one of the trucks with a shot from his freeze ray.

Michael had nearly reached the edge of the yard when he realized Sam was limping far behind.

"Sam!" Michael shouted as he ran back to him. "Are you all right?"

"I must have hurt my leg when we crashed into the ravine," said Sam. "It's getting worse and worse. I'm not going to make it."

"But you have to come, Sam. Don't give up now. The house is right over there."

"I can't go back, son," said Sam. "I've been away from the human world too long. All my friends are here. They're waiting for me back in the neutral zone. I only left them so I could help you."

"But Sam—"

"No buts. Here. This belongs to you." He reached into his pocket and took out the photo Michael had left behind in the jail cell.

"You keep it," Michael told him. He pressed it back into Sam's hand. "This way you'll remember me."

"Thanks, kid," said Sam. He wiped away a tear. "Now get. Go on. Hurry up. If you haven't made the transfer back to your universe before they blow up the house, you'll never get back."

Michael looked at the old lizard's blue eyes. They shone brightly in the light reflected from a nearby street lamp.

“Get!” barked Sam. “Off with you!”

“I’ll never forget you, Sam the man,” said Michael.

“That’s Sam the blue-eyed lizard man to you,” said his friend.

There were shouts coming from the end of the block. Michael heard ray guns being fired. He ran as quickly as he could for the strange house that linked the two similar-but-very-different worlds.

Michael found the front door locked. He headed for the back. The door there was locked, too. Breaking a window open with a rock, he reached inside and opened the door. Then he ran into the house and headed for the front room.

There was only one problem. He knew that the house linked the two different universes, but he had no idea how the link worked. There didn’t seem to be any controls. In fact, there wasn’t even a light switch on the wall of the empty room.

“Take me back!” he yelled. “I want to go home! I need to go home!”

Michael’s shouts did about as much good as yelling at the howling wind. The house sat empty and quiet around him. Outside, he could hear squealing tires. The scientists’ evil followers were coming.

Michael tried to remember where he had been when the house started spinning. It was tough to find the spot in the dark. He tried a dozen places, but nothing happened.

He ran to the window. Instead of the flashing shards of colors, he saw the reflections of shiny suits on the lawn. The lizard men were running to the front door.

Desperate, Michael ran to the door to make sure it was locked. As he touched the knob, he felt a very light shaking beneath his feet.

The doorknob was the control switch, he suddenly realized. Michael dove back toward the middle of the room. The house had already started to spin.

“Open up, or we’ll blow you out of there!” shouted a voice outside.

“Go ahead and try,” said Michael.

There were some shouts. He saw a flash of light and heard an explosion near the doorway.

Then the building started whirling like a weathervane in a tornado.

Michael knew what to expect this time. He even wanted it to happen. But the spinning still took him by surprise. He fell face first to the floor. He covered his head with his arms and waited for the shaking to stop.

He kept his eyes closed the whole time. When things settled down, he opened them very, very slowly.

The house looked exactly as it had before. Except for one thing: the door had been burned by the explosion. The whole front of the house was charred and there was smoke everywhere. The place might even be on fire.

Did the explosion damage the controls? If so, Michael was stuck in Swampville for all time.

Red lights shone through the window.

Oh no, Michael thought. I didn’t make it.

* * *

For a second, Michael panicked. He felt certain the special forces troops were still in front of the house. They would kill him for sure. He ran with all his might to the back door.

He was out the door in a flash, running for the hedges. Remembering that they were different in this world, he dodged to the left, trying to find an opening.

He didn’t quite make it. His foot tripped over something hard and over he went in a tumble. Somehow, he missed the wide bush and hit the ground. When he rolled over, a flashlight shone in his face.

‘‘What’s your name?’’ a voice demanded.

‘‘Please, I don’t belong here. Let me go to the neutral zone. I have a friend there. I won’t be any trouble. Please let me escape.’’

‘‘What are you talking about, kid?’’

‘‘Ask Mr. Ruglitz. He’ll stick up for me.’’

‘‘Mr. Roglitz? You’re not Michael Roglitz, are you? We’ve been looking everywhere for you.’’

Before Michael could roll away, the policeman grabbed his arm.

‘‘Your parents are worried sick. Where have you been?’’

‘‘My parents?’’

For the first time Michael looked towards the light. The policeman’s face came into view.

It was a normal, human face.

15

Michael had never been so happy to see someone in his life. He jumped from the ground right into the policeman’s arms.

“You’ll never believe what happened to me,’’ he told the officer. ‘‘I’ve been in an alternative universe.’’

“An alternative universe? What are you talking about, kid?’’

Michael slipped down and stood back. His voice seemed very familiar—maybe he was the human world’s Officer Anthony.

But even if he was, he would never believe Michael’s story.

“Let’s get behind the fire line,’’ said the policeman. “We have to let the firemen do their job.’’

“The fire line?’’ Michael turned around. The house was on fire. ‘‘What happened?’’

"Some sort of explosion. Too soon to tell," said the cop, leading Michael to the car. "You don't know anything about it, do you?"

"No, sir," said Michael.

Fire trucks were all over the front lawn. Hoses snaked everywhere. Even though the firemen were training water on the house, flames shot up out of control. The dark night sparkled red. The link between the two universes had been broken forever.

"What a shame. Brand-new house, too," said the policeman. "I liked those round windows," he added. "I've never seen anything like them on a house."

"I have," said Michael.

The policeman gave him a confused look, but Michael didn't explain.

Michael's parents met him at the police station. They were happier than the day he managed to pull off an "A" in every one of his subjects. His mom hugged him and kissed him four or five times. His dad started out angry, but he was hugging Michael within ten seconds.

"Where have you been?" they asked.

Michael took a gulp before answering. Should he tell them about the lizard universe?

No way! They'd think he was crazier than Daffy Duck.

But he couldn't lie to them. And the way they were looking at him, he knew they expected an answer.

"I was walking in the woods near the school," Michael said. It wasn't a lie, exactly. That's where he

had been—in the other universe, of course. "I got lost somehow. It was kind of wacky. I couldn't find my way back."

"Did you have a fight with your friends?" his mom asked.

"A little one," Michael admitted.

"They said you were playing by the new house, but you weren't there when I went back with them," she said. "They'll be glad to hear you're OK."

Michael nodded. He wondered to himself if they would believe him if he told them about the lizard world.

They probably wouldn't. In fact, he wasn't even sure he believed it himself—it all seemed so weird. But when he reached into his pocket, he felt the tooth he had lost in the lizard boy's bedroom. So he knew it had to have been real.

Of course, the tooth might not seem like proof to anyone else, including his friends. But it was enough that he knew it had happened.

"Well, let's get going," said Michael's dad.

"There are some papers you need to sign first," said the policeman. He led them back to the front of the building. This police station looked very similar to the one in the alternate universe. There was one major difference, though—the walls were painted blue.

Policemen walked in and out as Michael's dad examined the papers. The fire was making it an exciting night. A door opened from the hallway, and a man with gray hair and a beard slowly walked into the large room. He had a broom with him and began sweeping up.

Something about the janitor made Michael jump. His green pants and brown shirt were very, very familiar. In fact, if Michael hadn’t known any better, he would have sworn that the old man was Sam from the lizard world.

Of course, he didn’t look like a lizard. He looked like a regular guy, pushing a broom.

Michael glanced at his mom and dad. They were both talking to the policeman. He walked quietly over to the janitor.

‘‘Hello,’’ said Michael.

‘‘Hello,’’ said the man back.

‘‘I’ll bet your name is Sam.’’

The janitor was surprised. He opened his eyes wide in wonder as he turned toward Michael.

The thin, inside circle of his eyes, the iris part around the black center, was red.

The same color as lizard eyes.

‘‘Sam the man,’’ said the janitor. ‘‘At your service. What can I do for you?’’

Michael extended his hand. ‘‘I’m Michael the likable. I want to be your friend.’’

‘‘My friend?’’ Sam chuckled. ‘‘Well, sure. I’d like to be your friend, too.’’

‘‘You have red eyes,’’ Michael said.

‘‘Well, thank you for noticing,’’ said the man. ‘‘Few people do.’’ Then he smiled and added proudly, ‘‘My

eyes make me unique. I’m different than everyone else.’’

‘‘We have a lot more in common than you think,’’ said Michael.

Sam looked puzzled, but he smiled again anyway.

‘‘You can find me here every afternoon, and into the night.’’

‘‘Maybe I’ll stop by after school,’’ said Michael.

‘‘Do that.’’

‘‘Come on, Michael, it’s time to go.’’

As Michael followed his parents out to the car, he remembered how he had felt walking out of the police station with his lizard ‘‘parents.’’ He stopped short in the parking lot.

‘‘Mom, Dad, let me ask you something. Has there been another kid around here tonight who looked like me?’’

‘‘What do you mean?’’ his father asked.

‘‘Another Michael Roglitz. He might spell his name a little funny, and one or two things might be different, but he’d be just like me.’’

‘‘Not that I know of.’’ His mom put her hand on his hair and mussed it up.

‘‘Let’s say there was a kid who was lost, and he looked just like me. The only difference was that he had red eyes instead of blue. Would you let him stay with you?’’

‘‘We’d help him find his way home,’’ said his dad, opening the car door.

“What if you couldn’t? What if he was, you know, from an alternative universe or something?”

“I think you’ve been watching too much TV,” said his mom, sliding into the car.

Michael touched the lizard tooth in his pocket after he snugged his seatbelt. “Let’s just suppose that happened. Would you let him stay with us?”

“Michael, if we ever find someone from an alternative universe,” said his father, “we’ll get bunk beds and let him move in with you. I promise.”

“That’s all I wanted to know,” said Michael. He turned his head to the window and gazed outside. Sooner or later, he knew, he would spot his red-eyed friend. And then he’d help him out, just like he had been helped in the lizard universe.

“Gee, it’s good to be back home,” he said as they drove up the driveway in front of his house—his blue house. He realized then that blue was now his favorite color in the world, and it was really good to see it again.

CONTEST WINNER

MICHAEL ROGLITZ

The hero of this spine-tingling tale is named Michael Roglitz, after a real-life friend of mine who lives in Tampa, Florida. He does have a dad named Mike, and a mom named Millie. He doesn’t have a sister named Jamie, though—which is good considering how much of a pain she is in this book!

The *real* Michael Roglitz is every bit as clever as the Michael in the book. By the time this book is printed, he’ll be in fourth grade at Day Crest Elementary school. Michael was the winner in our contest earlier this year, and he helped inspire this tale.

He learned to read in first grade when his mom read him a Spinetingler classic, *My Teacher’s a Bug*. He’s been a bug on reading ever since, and Spinetinglers are tied for first place on his all-time favorite books list. His favorite in the series—after this one, I’ll bet—is *Blood Red Eightball*. That figures, since one of his hobbies is playing Nintendo. Michael’s best subjects are math and science—biology and animals, especially. He's writing his own horror story, so it looks like I'll have a little competition soon!

He likes to surf the Internet, with a little help from his dad, and has visited our web site at http://AvonBooks.com. I hope you do the same.

Michael has a cool collection of rocks, crystals, and fool's gold—and one gold nugget he panned himself!

Hmmm . . . that gives me another idea. What if the gold wasn't really gold, but a substance that gave whoever touched it special powers? Maybe they could read minds, or fly, or suddenly grow very, very tall.

Looks like I've got another story to work on.

Thanks, Michael.

—M. T. Coffin

DARE TO BE SCARED . . .

Did Michael's slithery journey freak you out? Well, hold on to your hat, 'cause the circus is coming to town, and you've never seen anything like it!
Check out this preview of
Circus F.R.E.A.K.S.,
the next Avon Camelot Spinetingler,
coming in December 1997.

I could hear my older sister, Kourtney, coming down the hallway toward the bathroom that she and I shared.

I was ready for her.

This would be a morning she'd never forget.

I held my breath.

When Kourtney finally reached the door, she knocked.

After a few seconds, she said, ''Charles Brantly! Are you still there?''

I don't know why Kourtney feels she has to use my whole name every time she talks to me.

''Answer me, Charles Brantly!''